

Mages Ascendant: The Saga Begins

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Summary: In an ancient land of magic, the Guardians must hunt down four magesâ€"a village farmboy, a girl locked away in a tower, a white-haired thief, and a rebellious princessâ€"and teach them the ways of light before Pitch can corrupt them in darkness. A ROTBTD Elemental AU. Minimal multishipping, mild violence. Chapter 12: Jack joins the team.

1. Prologue

**A/N: Long time, no see. It's been a few years and I've gotten better at writing in the time since I went on hiatus, so I'm back with a new story and it's going to be the longest, hardest thing I've ever written. **

**Welcome to Mages Ascendant. It's a Rise of the Brave Tangled Dragons Elemental AU, to put it simply. I've taken all the characters and put them in a realistic fanmade world that was heavily influenced by the settings of Tangled, Brave, Frozen, and HTTYD. There are two planned stories in the series, with a possible third one depending on the feedback I get, we'll just have to see :3 The story is also available on Tumblr, AO3 and DeviantArt if you would like to follow it there, as well! I have some fanart for the story on dA and I have author notes and answered questions on Tumblr. This will update rapidly as I have already published 8 chapters on the above 3 sites, and then it will update steadily with the others as I write the chapters. My planned update schedule is every two weeks ^.^ Gives enough people time to find and read it. So check it out, see if you like it, and go ahead and reblog/favorite/watch/comment/review/anything! XD The author notes will get shorter, I promise. **

The moon was trying to speak.

The realization came to Nicholas St. North quite suddenly, as he bent over a map inside of his hideout tucked away in the isolated Eredon

Mountains. His study was suddenly awash with white moonlight, shining through the glass-paned window.

North squinted and straightened, dusting his palms as he studied the sky. He was a ferocious sight to see, with a silvery beard that cascaded down the front of his scarlet tunic. His arms were thick and corded and he stood at nearly seven feet tall. But his face was ruddy and playful, and his blue eyes were as bright as jewels. North gazed at the moon for a second longer, then turned on his heel and stormed out of the study. This was huge. The moon was a mysterious, powerful well of magic that often had fitful insights into the future. Only rarely did it choose to share its foresight with the mages. North couldn't miss this attempt at contact. He thundered down a broad, wooden-paneled, dark-beamed hallway, every window streaming with silver radiance.

He ascended three, four, five staircases, higher and higher into the frames of his fortress-like abode. He passed thick tapestries hanging on gray stone walls, torches gone cold in their iron brackets, long, mazy hallways. Finally he came to his destination—a single hallway, a single door, bound with iron and oak. North strode forward and pushed it open briskly, entering the room beyond. The chamber was a perfect sphere with a flat bottom, engraved around its diameter with curved, archaic symbols. Moonlight refracted onto the walls from a transparent, faceted stone set into a pedestal at the center of the room. The shifting blue light came from a hole in the ceiling, through which the full moon could be seen. The Moonstone was its only mode of communication. When it called, the mages hastened to listen.

"All right, I am here," North said aloud in a thick Damai accent, tilting his head back to watch the sky. "What is big news?"

The light flared for an instant, brightening the room. A bright column began glowing above the Moonstone, inside of which formed an indistinct shape. He leaned forward in anticipation. The amorphous shape became more solid, tall and thin with a bushy top—a tree. But there was something more within its ghostly silhouette, the shape of a young girl. Her shining hair fell all the way to her knees and her eyes were big and soft. It was whisked away and replaced by a shimmering snowflake, surrounding the outline of a boy with spiky hair and a playful smile. It, too, disappeared and re-formed into a swath of blue flame around a round-faced, curly-haired girl, which blew away and settled into a short, plain boy with wind tearing at his clothes.

North was thoroughly amazed. The moon had just predicted the rise of four new mages, when never before had it warned them of one. This was beyond abnormal. "Why?" he asked, looking back at the moon. "What is coming?"

The moonlight flickered and a shadow was cast in the pillar of light, in the shape of a man. The room seemed to grow darker and colder and the shape only hovered for a moment before the moonlight suddenly dimmed and disappeared, plunging the room into semidarkness. Alarmed, North watched as a swath of clouds covered the moon in a silvery haze. Interference. It confirmed two of his worst fears: the leader of Kosmaria was rising, and he was becoming more powerful. He strode out of the room in a rush. He was going to call the Guardians.

And he could only hope desperately that no one else had seen the message.

But someone already had.

* * *

><p>The fork in the road was practically invisible in the midnight storm that blanketed the countryside. In fact, being a stranger to the area, the dark, shadowy figure standing there nearly missed it. His eyes roved over the diverging muddy tracks in a flash of lightning that cracked across the sky. Beyond the path, he could see nothing, but he strode forward confidently into the blinding rain, pulling his sodden cloak tighter around his shoulders. In the rumble of thunder that followed, his mutter was drowned out to everyone but himself:<p>

"Next stop, Berk."

2. Chapter 1

Hiccup sat bolt upright almost before he woke up. Gray light filtered through the window in his room, testament to last night's storm. The thunder had been loud, yes, and his dreams peculiar, but that wasn't what woke Hiccup. He felt as if maybeâ€|no, he knew something was off in Berk. It was a peculiar, nearly physical sensation, a kind of cold pulse.

Hiccup swung his feet out of bed and fumbled for his warm, furry boots, shivering all the while. He had dark green, inquisitive eyes beneath a shag of straight brown hair. Freckles dotted his fair skin, disappearing into the collar of his plain green tunic. All in all, he was a fairly ordinary-looking boy of fourteen. Unfortunately, that's what made him such a target in the village. Hiccup lived in the province of Kunnia, which was a rough, warlike area at the west end of Traum. Everyone who lived there was large and stocky, all muscle and not too much brain. Hiccup was more out of place than a water mage at a bonfire. He had a streak of intelligence that led him to many hours sketching and inventing, a complete oddity in the village of Berk. His embarrassment was only worsened by the fact that his father was the Chief of Berkâ€|a more stereotypical Kunnian you could find nowhere else. Bulging muscles, wild red beard, towering height, booming voice, Stoick the Vast was everything Hiccup was not. In fact, it seemed ludicrous that Hiccup would one day take his father's place in ruling the Tribe.

Hiccup pulled on his vest and left the room, pausing to scratch Fiddlesticks the cat under his chin where he'd been sleeping at the end of Hiccup's bed. He couldn't hear anyone moving downstairs and assumed that Stoick had already left. Sure enough, the house was empty, so Hiccup stoked the fire and heated up some of last night's stew for breakfast.

As he ate, he pondered over the feeling he'd gotten earlier. It was still there, just less intense, a mild chill in his core. What could be causing it? He'd always felt a special connection to Berk as his homeland, but this was something different. He probed at the feeling, trying to secure details about it. Nobody was in danger. No evil had entered the village. But something else had, somethingâ€|new. Hiccup

gave up pushing himself for answers and went outside to search the village.

Kunnia was a wild, wet place, but Berk itself had to be the wildest and wettest. The town was scattered across the sloping base of an enormous mountain, the many houses crammed and twisted all around its stony roots. There were few areas for farming, so Berk's industry relied heavily on fish from the nearby Lake Evindell. The body of water was so large, it looked like an ocean. Today, its waters were choppy and steel gray as it reflected the passing storm. The steep roads were slick with mud and pools of water. A fresh, damp smell pervaded the freezing morning air, and Hiccup spotted a flicker of lightning on the horizon. He began to make his way down to the main part of the village. The feeling within him flared, and he quickened his pace.

There seemed to be nothing amiss in Berk. Herds of sheep grazed placidly by the road. The fishermen left for the lake with their nets and traps. He never saw Stoick but figured he was off Chiefing somewhere. Hiccup had practically given up when he felt it again. A surge of ice seemed to burn through his veins, making him gasp and leaving his heart pounding. _What is going on?!_

"Excuse me?"

Hiccup yelped and leaped a foot in the air as he turned around, where he found a very surprised figure cloaked in black standing behind him. His gloved hands were raised like he expected an attack. "Whoa! Whoa! Easy there! Sorry about that."

"It's all right," Hiccup assured him, though his breathing still came rather fast. Underneath the cloak, the man was dressed simply in a dark shirt, black trousers and light scale armor falling around his thighs. His face was shadowed by his hood, and he stood a head taller than Hiccup. The feeling in his chest grew to be almost painful before fading away entirely. "I'm sorry, do I know you?"

A grin flitted across the stranger's face. "I don't believe you do. What village is this, may I ask?"

"Berk. This is Berk." Hiccup stuck out his hand. "I'm Hiccup."

He hesitated a second before taking it, adjusting his grip and shaking firmly. His fingers felt a bit odd under the black leather. "A unique name. Mine is a bit tricky to pronounce in the common tongue, so you may call me Thomas."

Hiccup noticed the subtle hiding of Thomas' real name, but he let it slide in the hopes of keeping on good terms with him. "What brings you this far north?"

Thomas shrugged. "I like to wander. I've been all over Trauma€Cesaret, Damai, Lysa€| " He dropped his voice conspiratorially. "Even traveled over to Kosmaria for a bit."

Hiccup was awestruck. Kosmaria was Traum's only neighboring country. The two nations were isolated by a ring of mountains, thick forests, and the sea. Relations were stiff between them, and it was almost impossible to cross the river Ybaron that served as a border without running into trouble. The fact that Thomas was even here to tell the

tale meant there was a lot more to him than met the eye.

Thomas continued, "I'm hoping to stay awhile before I make it around the lake to the Shivering Shores." He looked anxiously at Hiccup. "D'you think it's all right, orâ€"?"

Hiccup nodded eagerly. "Of course! We don't get too many visitors. Berk's kind of isolated. Everyone will be glad to meet you. I can even bring you to the Chief, if you want."

Thomas smiled and nodded. "I'd like that. Thank you."

It was only then that Hiccup finally figured out what was off about the newcomer, and it hit him so hard that he turned on his heels and started towards the plaza to conceal his startled reaction.

Thomas' eyesâ€"he had slitted pupils, like a cat's. Whatever he pretended to be, he wasn't human.

****A/N:** In a chapter-posting rush :P tell me what you think as you go!**

3. Chapter 2

Jack Frost shrugged his cloak higher up on his shoulders and eyed the crowd bustling around him. Kosmarians were a tough bunch to be around. They always wore dark clothing and suspicious demeanors, and they always had a handy dagger tucked away somewhere in the folds of their cloaks. Made it hard to pick their pockets.

Jack was the opposite of the typical Kosmarian, with their darker skin and hair. Jack had piercing blue eyes and slim features. His skin was very pale, which gave him a cold, drowned look. The strangest thing about Jack was his white hairâ€"not just a light shade of blond, but pure white, with hints of silver and gray. And it always insisted on standing up in stiff, windblown spikes. He usually hid it under his deep blue cowl when among others. It would be bad if someone recognized him. Especially here in the middle of Ira, where there would be guards from the capital of Noctis sniffing for troublemakers around every corner.

Besides, he couldn't be late in meeting his accomplice.

Bare feet skidding over the dirt road, Jack turned into an alley, pausing to check the store next to it. Apothecary. Got it. He relaxed in the darkness and leaned against the wall, propping his hooked staff next to him. The autumn sunlight shifted and fluttered as people strolled by, hardly glancing at him. He grimaced at their fine clothes. He probably should have picked a more low-profile area to skulk around in. In his threadbare cowl, scruffy shirt and worn brown pants bound with cord at his calves, he might get arrested just for looking poor. It wouldn't be the first time nor the last.

Jack slipped off his hood and craned his neck back to look at the sky, which was sharp, clear and bright blue. a breeze cut through the aromas of smoke and hot food, carrying the first bites of winter. He soaked in the cold, inhaling it and closing his eyes. There was always a special connection between him and the cold. Winter. Snow. It invigorated him more than any drink; his senses felt sharper and

his sight clearer. The effects bordered on supernatural, for he never felt stiff joints or numb fingers, and never saw his breath mist in the air. Jack suspected he could walk through a blizzard and be completely fine.

"Pssst!"

Jack's eyes shot open. He lunged to his feet and reached for his staff, peering into the depths of the alley. An indistinct figure lurked farther down in the gloom. "Jack?" it said.

Relief flooded through him. "Flynn!" Jack raced down the alley and stopped in front of the man, grinning. Flynn wore a long-sleeved white shirt with the sleeves rolled up, a collared bluish-green best and brown pants with tall leather boots. The two were good friends and partners-in-crime. It was Flynn Rider who had taken Jack in after finding him lying unconscious in the forests of Damai with no memory of anything but his name: Jack Frost. But even though his past was shady and obscured, Flynn had stuck with him for over two years now. "How did it go? Did you get it?"

Flynn flourished the satchel smugly. "Bingo. I had to ditch the Stabbingtons, but it'll be worth it."

Jack unlatched the bag and looked inside. "Wow," he breathed. A crown encrusted with gems and diamonds glittered in its leather holdings. Easily worth a fortune and then some. He closed it and handed it back. "Anyone follow you?"

Flynn laughed and punched Jack playfully. "Please; you're talking to Flynn Rider. Nothing follows me."

Out on the street, a clamor arose, followed by men shouting and horses calling. "Where's Rider?" "Come on, this way!"

Jack eyed Flynn balefully. "Nothing?"

"Oh, you meant those guys."

Rolling his eyes, Jack drew his hood back over his head. "Gimme the bag."

"Now, wait a minuteâ€" "

"I said give me the bag, not the crown."

Flynn understood and handed it over without arguing further. Jack slung it over his shoulders. "I'll distract the guards. You need to go deeper into Kosmaria where no one will recognize you. Try and make it to Korku or Temat."

"What about you?" Flynn retorted. "What if you get caught?"

Jack smirked. "Please. You're talking to Jack Frost. Nothing catches me."

A cold wind roared down the alley, and with that final remark, Jack unleashed his final secret. He brandished his staff, crouched down, andâ€|flew. Straight up into the air, higher than the buildings, the wind at his feet and in his ears.

Jack was no wind mage, but ever since he had woken up in those wintry woods, he'd been able to ride the wind. It came naturally to him, like the breeze had been his friend all his life. As a thief, the ability had become invaluable.

With a flick of his will, Jack landed on the apothecary roof and surveyed the situation. Seven men on horseback were approaching down the street, scanning people's faces and calling to each other. Not good. He slid down the tiled roof and caught the small spire on the corner, hanging on with one hand and leaning over the edge, twenty feet above the ground.

"Hey! Lysians!" he hollered.

Not only did the guards look up, but so did everyone else. Whoops. "Looking for something?" With a flourish, Jack showed them the empty satchel and swung it around. Unfortunately, as he did so, a particularly fierce gust of wind threw back his cowl, exposing his white hair to the guards. Double whoops.

One of the guards drew his sword, and his white horse bellowed and reared. "Let's get 'im, boys!"

Jack slung the bag back over his shoulders and took off, leaping from rooftop to rooftop and leading the guards away from Flynn. It would be easy enough to lose them, but Jack wanted their sights locked on himself and the crown. He glanced over his shoulder and caught a glimpse of Flynn leaving the scene, disappearing into the crowd. Good. He'll be fine.

Something zinged past his ear and he ducked, skidding on a flat roof until he was safely behind a chimney. Crossbows. They had crossbows. The guards rarely left Corona with anything more dangerous than a halberd. They really wanted that crown back. His heart thudded wildly as he realized that the game had just gotten deadly serious.

You wanna play, Lysians? Let's play.

Jack shot out from behind the chimney and across the street, propelled by the wind. Two more crossbow bolts fired after him, but they were too low. He planted his feet on a storefront, crouched for a second, and then shoved off and landed in the street, rolling to avoid injury. They wouldn't dare to shoot into the crowd. They were going to be in enough trouble as it was, Traum guards running rampant in a province of Kosmaria.

That gave Jack an idea.

People darted out of the way as Jack dashed through the street, bare feet slapping against the hard-packed dirt. He could hear the guards shouting angrily at the crowd blocking their way. It would slow them down, but it wouldn't stop them. He tore through a market square, narrowly avoiding stalls and merchants lined up on the cobblestone, hawking goods in the meager sunlight. Jack ripped around a few corners and almost immediately found what he was looking for: a mounted patrol of men in black armor and metal face guards in the shape of glaring horses. The group was fifteen strong, more than enough to do the job.

Jack passed by the Kosmarian guards with no trouble at all. But the same couldn't be said for the Lysians, Jack thought with a satisfied grin. He heard the Kosmarians shouting at the invading patrol, along with the clatter of horse hooves, and slowed his dash to a walk. Problem solved. Now all he had to do was stay out of Traum, loop back around the city he was in and find Flynn among thousands of Kosmarian citizens.

This was turning out to be a great day.

****A/N:** Jack's story is fun ^.^ not as much fun as Hiccup and Thomas', but his story gets super interesting, especially in book 2.**

4. Chapter 3

Merida stormed angrily into her room and banged the door shut. Her red curls flew and bounced as she threw herself face-first onto her bed, crying out in frustration. There were some days when being a lady had its benefits. But not now. Not today. Today, dinner had been rudely interrupted by her parents' announcement that she was to be wed soon. Yes, she loved her parents—especially her father, as the two were alike all the way down to their looks, red hair and blue eyes and all. But she and her mother were complete opposites, always butting heads over everything. Elinor was tall and straight, with long brown hair and very proper ideas about how the daughter of a lord should be raised. Ideas that, unfortunately, involved betrothal.

In another storm of fury, Merida reached for her sword and rolled to her knees to begin hacking at the sturdy frame of her four-poster bed. It was something she often did when she was upset. Across the room, the door swung open, and she dropped her sword and glared at her mother as she entered the room. "Betrothal?" she yelled, clutching at the scarred bedpost. _"Marriage?"_

Elinor ignored her and walked across the room to an unused chessboard resting on the shelf. "Once, there was an ancient kingdom," she began, picking up the board.

Merida groaned and slid off her bed onto the floor. "No, Mum, not th' ancient kingdomâ€|"

"It's name long forgotten," she continued, "ruled by a wise and fair king who was much beloved." Here she picked up the white king piece and held it up. "And when he grew old he divided the kingdom among his four sons, that they should be the pillars on which their piece of land rested." She took off the four knight pieces and balanced the chessboard on top of them. "But the oldest prince wanted to rule the land for himself. He followed his own path and the kingdom fell to dark outside forces." She pulled out one of the knights, and the entire board fell to the ground, scattering the pieces.

Merida glanced over as the black and white soldiers settled. "That's a nice _story,_" she said patronizingly.

"It's not joost a story, Merida," Elinor said sternly, looking down at her. "Legends are lessons; they ring with truth."

"Och, Mum." Merida rolled her eyes and turned away, glaring at the

cold ashes in the fireplace.

"I would advise you to make your peace with this, Merida. The lords are coming in a few days to present the suitorsâ€"

"It's not fair," she snapped, interrupting her mother midsentence. She heard Elinor's skirts rustle as she crossed the room.

"It's joost marriage, Merida," said Elinor, exasperated. "It's not the end of the world."

Merida leaped to her feet and slammed the door on her mother's back with a heavy bang. "Joost marriage," she growled. "Joost marriage, she says! Aye, and ah should be expected tae give mah hand out like a roasted pig! AAGH!" She kicked out at her bedpost, sending a lancing pain through her toes. Fear began to taint her rage as the full implications of being married began to hit her. She'd be tied down to her responsibilities, no riding, no archery, no freedom. It was like a heavy weight had been slapped across her back without her consent. _How could they do this tae me?!_

Holding off on her furious pacing, she sank onto her bed, mind racing. There had to be a way out of this. There had to be some way to talk to Elinor and convince her to turn away the suitors.

Ah could run awae.

The thought was fleeting, and the audacity of the idea caused her to reject it immediately. _Where would ah go? 'S not like ah can put up a tent in the woods._

But the more she thought about it, the more she realized that it might be the only way to escape betrothal. She had a horse, and she had money. Nobody would know that she was a runaway princess. The possibilities were attractive. Besides, she didn't need to leave permanently, just long enough to teach her mother a lesson â€" which would be a while. The plans began forming in her mind, and she tried to stifle them, but a hot rush of rebellion rose within her and for a moment her reason deserted her.

"It's mah life," she said aloud. "Ah should be allowed tae change mah fate, aye?"

Nobody answered her. But in those few short minutes, she had made her decision.

The sun had only been down for a few hours when Merida made her move.

Peeking out of her room, she paused and listened to the innards of the castle for any hint of movement. Her parents' room was close, but she could hear nothing. Her bag swung heavily from her shoulders as she slipped out the door and closed it quietly. Perfect. Couldn't even tell she was gone.

She tiptoed down the stairs, watching the hall for any servants that happened to be up. The dying fireplace silhouetted the snarling bears standing dead and stiff around the room, painting their black silky fur in a ruddy glow. She glanced away from the beasts, remembering all too well the encounter with the demon bear Mor'du when she was a

child. It was in that battle that her father had lost his leg, and he told the tale so often that everyone in the castle had it memorized.

Merida flew down the hall, clutching her quiver so it wouldn't rattle, keeping her footsteps light and quick. She didn't run into any trouble until the front gate, where she knew two guards stood on either side of the door. _Aw, blast it._ She'd been hoping for better luck but her fortune had been turned on its head. Now she had to get close enough to the gate to be able to open it fast enough and ride away without getting caught. Brilliant. Merida went back down the hall and up a side staircase to start Plan B.

Upwards she climbed until she passed a window big enough for her idea to work. She carefully unlatched it and pushed it open, letting the cold night air rush into the stone hallway. Carefully sliding an arrow out of her quiver, she set it on her bow, pulled the string back, sighted once more, exhaled, and released it on a straight course for the armory.

An enormous crash reverberated through the night as the arrow struck shield, sword, breastplate, anything and everything that would make a loud noise. Below, she saw the silhouettes of the guards rushing forward to investigate the noise, and she followed her cue. Bolting back down the stairs, she slipped out of the front gates and raced across the soft dirt of the courtyard, heading for the stables, whistling as loud as she dared. Angus pricked his ears and his head shot up, nose quivering.

There was no time to lose. The sentries were calling for help, searching for the source of the commotion. Merida vaulted onto his back, the pack banging against her side, and dug her heels into his sides. Angus went roaring across the courtyard, straight at the outer gates. By the time the guards noticed them, it was too late. He only paused a moment to kick out the board blocking the gates and shoved them open, charging across the stony bridge and into the shadowy forest beyond. Merida looked over her bouncing shoulder at the receding castle and felt a surge of anger and fierce defiance. Castle DunBroch was only visible for a few more moments before the pair plunged into the woods.

The undergrowth snapped and hissed as her horse battled her way through, panting lightly, stumbling in the darkness. _A_h should have brought a lantern or somethin'._ They didn't have to go far, though, only deep enough into the trees to be out of the reach of her parents. Then she could camp out overnight and wait until morning to escape into the outer reaches of Cesaretâ€

Her thoughts were rudely interrupted as Angus slammed to a halt, neighing in fear. Merida clutched tightly to his mane and looked at the path in front of them, searching for a bear or a wolf that might have spooked him. Instead of a hairy, snarling beast however, she saw a small orb of blue light, like a wisp of smoke, pulsing and flickering.

Merida caught her breath. _A wisp!_

Something faint stirred in her memory, a recollection of the benevolent figures leading her through a golden, sunlit forest. Whatever people around these parts wanted to believe, she knew that

the wisps were benevolent creatures, and to see one now was extremely good luck on her part. Nobody moved for a heartbeat, as the wisp stared at Merida and Merida stared at the wisp and Angus snorted nervously, dancing to one side. Then, slowly, one after another, a line of wisps sprang out of nowhere, marking a meandering path through the dense forest. She slowly urged Angus to follow them, much to his reluctance and disapproval.

The sounds of pursuit faded away, leaving only the quiet sounds of nighttime to roll and throb in Merida's ears, keeping her wary and alert. But the wisps never wavered, and as soon as she drew near to one, it would sigh and vanish as quickly as it had appeared. Where they were leading her, and why, she had no clue, but she was grateful for the little spirits' company. Eventually the last one faded away, and she was left looking at a large clearing with a small, bubbling stream running like liquid silver in the moonlight. The perfect place to hide and camp.

"Thank yu," she whispered aloud, but her words were met with silence. The wisps were gone.

****A/N: Okay, so Merida's not a princess. I figured having her AND Rapunzel as princesses might be a bit much, but hey, daughter of a lord still has some hefty benefits.****

****Oh, by the way, if you want a map you can go poke around my DeviantArt, I've got a map and a guide on Kosmaria and Traum if anything gets confusing. I tend to name-drop without a lot of explanation. ****

5. Chapter 4

Rapunzel leaned out of her tower window and let her long hair tumble and tangle on the breeze, staring at the iron-gray sky. No, it probably wasn't going to rain today. It didn't really matter either way. She would stay cooped up in her lonely little tower, like she had been for the past eighteen years. It wasn't like she could get out anyway. She'd tried. But there was only one set of stairs and one door, and her overprotective mother kept it locked day and night. Rapunzel didn't really mind. She knew of the dangerous people that lurked outside of the cove, just waiting for a little girl like her to go wandering alone. All in all, she was glad to be safe, but going so long without her feet on the ground had begun to bore her.

Turning away from the window, Rapunzel walked over to her bookshelf, feeling her hair swirling around her ankles. Her mother was also a bit paranoid and wouldn't let her have sharp objects, so her golden hair had grown unusually long. She took care of it meticulously, making sure it never grew ratty or tangled. She took three books off the shelf, only because those were the contents of her entire library. She'd rather spend time painting the many walls of her tower, being a particularly good artist after eighteen years of practice, but just yesterday she had finished her last piece. There was literally no room left anywhere for her art. It was as though a defining point in her life that she'd been trying to achieve for a very, very long time. She wanted to leave her tower. Rapunzel was afraid to bring it up to her mother for fear of upsetting her, but it was the one thing she wanted most. the map in her book was so much

bigger than the confines of her tower, and she longed to see it all. But she couldn't leave.

Sighing, Rapunzel sat on her bed and opened to the two worn pages, staring wistfully at the miles and miles of inked-in land that she could almost taste, it was so close. _Maybeâ€|for tomorrow, my birthday, she'll finally let me leave._ It was a distant hope, but it was still a hope, and she held tightly to it.

The shutters downstairs slammed abruptly and Rapunzel sat up straight, heart pounding. Had it gotten windy all of a sudden?

Then she froze as she heard a voiceâ€"a slight panting noise, and then, "Whewâ€|okay, that was close. Convenient tower, nice hiding spot, couldn't possibly be any catches, right? Right. Optimism, Flynn."

Rapunzel crept to the threshold of her bedroom and peeked out, quivering. She'd never heard anything like that voice, but could only assume it was a man. There was a personâ€"a person!â€"silhouetted by the gray light from outside, but she couldn't quite tell who it was; the light blurred the outlines of the black figure. It certainly wasn't her mother. Breathing out slowly, Rapunzel began creeping down the stairs. It was dim enough in the tower that her intruder didn't catch her.

He turned away from the light a bit and reached inside his shirt. "Well, you were worth quite a bit of trouble, now weren't you?" he said to something in his hand. Rapunzel felt for something behind her and grabbed the cold iron handle of a frying pan. Yes. Perfect.

"You better make it up to me, you little cash cow." He was still talking to the thing he was carrying. Rapunzel wrinkled her nose. Sure she talked to the little potted plants on her windowsill, but those were alive, weren't they? _What a strange man. Are they all like this?_

She edged closer and closer, hefting the pan up over her shoulder with both hands. "Sure hope Jack gets here soon," he remarked, and that was the last thing that came out of his mouth before Rapunzel swung the pan as hard as she could and it connected with the back of his head. Or, it should have been the last thing. She supposed the sudden yelp of pain counted, too.

"OW! What in Kosmariaâ€"?" He fell to his knees, dropping the object and grabbing the back of his head.

"Oh." Rapunzel lowered the pan, biting her lip. "You were supposed to be knocked out."

"I'm sorry?" the man sputtered, looking up at her through glazed eyes, rubbing his skull. "Iâ€|wasâ€|ow." He squinted then, pausing in his vigorous massage. "You know, you're pretty cute," he mumbled. "I'd like you if you hadn't tried to kill me."

Rapunzel wondered if she'd knocked something out of place in his head. "I didn't try to kill you!" she protested. "You broke into my tower!"

"Your tower? I'll have you know that Flynn Rider would neverâ€" " He

glanced around at the walls and seemed to come to a sudden realization. "Oh. Yeah. I guess I did. Sorry about that, blondie."

"Rapunzel," she corrected, hefting the frying pan. Flynn held his hands up in surrender, coming up to one knee.

"Gesundheit." He suddenly looked around his feet, growing frantic. "Oh, hey, by the way, blondie, you haven't seen a crown around here, have you? It's, uhâ€¦myâ€¦cousin's."

Reaching back with a bare foot, Rapunzel drew the glittering ring of gold from where it had rolled behind her and picked it up. "What, this?" she asked, still pointing the frying pan at him loosely. Flynn eyed the flat circle of metal as it drifted in front of his nose.

"Um, yep, that'd be the one. If you could just hand it overâ€¦slowlyâ€¦and I'll be on my way. You won't even miss me."

Rapunzel was about to hand it back when she realized how desperate he looked. An idea began forming in her mind, and she pulled the crown close to her chest. "Actually, Flynn Rider, I was going to offer you a deal."

"A deal?" he said incredulously, still hesitant to move any farther than he already had.

Rapunzel gestured out the window with her pan before aiming it at Flynn once more. "Do you know how to get out of Kosmaria?" she said in what she hoped was a commanding tone. Flynn eyed her.

"Sweetheart, what kind of a thâ€¦uhâ€¦traveler do you think I am?"

"A good one, I hope," she announced, "because you're going to get me out of here."

That was it, the moment she had been waiting for her whole life. Flynn needed his crown and Rapunzel needed a way out. "We can help each other," she continued. "You will act as my guide and take me out of this tower and into Traum. Then, and only then, will I return your crown. That is my deal." After she gave it back, though, she wasn't certain what she would do, but it couldn't be too hard. What could possibly go wrong?

Flynn sighed heavily and dropped his hands. "All right, fine."

She was stunned by his sudden acquiescence. "Wait, really?" she squeaked, the frying pan hopping as she jumped in the air. Excitement flooded through her. She was leaving! She was going to leave the tower! The weighty pan flipped upwards and clipped Flynn on the nose, causing him to cry out again. "Watch the pan, blondie! You need me alive!"

"Sorry," she almost whispered, hugging it close.

****A/N:** Out of all of the Big Four, Rapunzel's story is the one most

like the movie's. Seems like it would make my job easier but it's actually harder because now I have to make it interesting XD Ah, well, bear with me.**

6. Chapter 5

The good news was, Hiccup finally found Stoick in the middle of the village. The bad news was, he was surrounded by villagers.

Hiccup had envisioned a quiet, private conversation with his father, possibly in the confines of their house. Not a public announcement in the midst of a bunch of superstitious Kunnians. This was quickly spiraling out of hand.

Thomas came up short beside him. "Ohâ€¦is this a bad time?"

"No!" Hiccup said hastily. "Noâ€¦it's justâ€¦my dad's really busy a lot, you gotta know how to get his attention." He hesitated, the irony of his words hitting him. That wasn't even something Hiccup himself knew how to do yet, and they were related.

His sudden embarrassment only increased as Thomas said, "Well, you know how, right?"

"Ofâ€¦of course!" Hiccup blustered, waving a hand dismissively and turning to face him. "You know, since he's my dad andâ€¦and all. The trick is to simplyâ€¦"

"HICCUP!"

He cut short with his mouth open and slowly closed his eyes. "You just have to exist," he muttered under his breath, turning slowly around to face his dad. Stoick was marching towards him with all the Chiefliness he could muster and a stormy expression on his face.

"Hey, dad! Uhhâ€¦"

"Hiccup, you were supposed to be at the forge this morning," he said, scowling down at ihm. Hiccup cringed at the scrutiny.

"Ohhâ€¦yeah. I was going there, I was on my way. I would've gotten there eventually."

His snark was lost on Stoick.

"An' then I find you with thisâ€¦character," Stoick huffed, facing Thomas. Hiccup was shocked to see that Thomas wasn't fazed in the least; he stood boldly but respectfully, with his chin high, shoulders squared, feet apart. Stoick was quickly discovering that it was difficult to intimidate someone who was almost as tall as he was. "What would be your name, now?"

"Thomas, sir," he said briskly, his voice even deeper than the Chief's gruff bass. "Am I right in saying that you would be the Chief?"

"You are," Stoick affirmed, somewhat less miffed than before. "An' what're you doing running around with my son?"

"Dad."

"With all due respect, sir, he was showing me to you. I'm a traveler and I was hoping to stay a while, a few days at most. I won't be any trouble," he added.

Stoick considered Thomas and glanced back at all of the villagers and their problems he had to attend to. "Very well," she said shortly. "Hiccup, show him to Lars' old hut, then back to the forge with you."

"Yeah, Dad." Hiccup gestured for Thomas to follow him. "C'mon, this way."

As they left the plaza, Thomas leaned over to Hiccup. "A little grumpy, isn't he?" he said in a low voice.

Hiccup chuckled dryly. "You have no idea. Don't worry, it's not you. I'm pretty sure my existence just annoys him constantly. He kinda respects you, actually—he pushed but you didn't back down." He couldn't keep a note of admiration out of his voice.

Thomas tugged his hood lower, looking self-conscious. "Oh, I'm not—I don't want to come between you two—"

Hiccup shrugged. "There's plenty of space," he joked. "Ever since my mom—you know."

"Oh. I'm truly sorry."

"Nah, it's okay. It was a long time ago. She was taken in a draconian raid, so—" He gestured vaguely.

"I can relate," Thomas said, his dark eyebrows meeting over his strange eyes. "My mother died in childbirth; I have no memories of her."

"That's horrible," Hiccup said sympathetically. At least he had bits and pieces to remember her by. Thomas had nothing. "It's funny, isn't it?" Hiccup said after a minute. Thomas looked at him quizzically.

"What is?"

"That I'm—we're—I don't know." He shrugged. "Kind of the same, I guess." It was hard to put into words. It wasn't exactly what he'd meant to say, but Thomas seemed to understand.

"Yes," he said thoughtfully. "It seems we have much in common." He met Hiccup's gaze briefly and looked away. "Perhaps more than we realize."

_What does he mean? _Hiccup wondered. Again, he pondered what the stranger's eyes could possibly tell about him. _Does he know something I don't? Is that why he's here?_

"Come on, guys, I saw him go this way!"

Hiccup's stomach dropped as he heard his cousin Snotlout's voice from around the corner of one of the huts. "Suffering scallops," he muttered, coming to a stop.

Thomas peered around them at the houses, looking concerned. "Who was that?" he asked.

"Snotlout." He checked down the alley next to them. "You think we could take a shortcut?"

"You mean to avoid him?" Thomas looked mildly confused.

"Trust me, if you had seen him, you'd want to avoid him, too." But Hiccup carefully avoided Thomas' gaze as he said this. The newcomer assessed the situation and instantly saw right through Hiccup's evasive answer.

"He hurts you, doesn't he?" he said softly. "He's a bully."

Hiccup shrugged and scuffed at the ground with his boot, unwilling to admit it, but confirming the truth all the same. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Thomas frown and adjust his gloves. The other teen's calls grew louder.

"Sounds like they need to be taught a lesson," he remarked, and Hiccup looked up, hardly daring to believe it. With a reassuring smile, Thomas turned to face the noises just as the source came down the street and stopped, seeing the pair standing in the middle of the road.

"Who're you?" Snotlout demanded. Behind him, Ruffnut and Tuffnut ogled the tall figure that stood in their way. Hiccup was delighted to see the looks of uncertainty and apprehension on their faces.

"Oh, where are my manners?" Thomas moved forward and the threesome involuntarily leaned back as he towered over them. "The name's Thomas." He bowed at the waist almost mockingly, still over two heads taller than them even hunched over. "Hiccup was just showing me to the Chief. I'm planning to stay here in Berk for a few days. It'll be a pleasure getting to know you."

Hiccup actually had to choke back a laugh as Snotlout and the twins looked stunned and flustered. There was no way they were going to pick a fight with Thomas hanging around. For the first time in his life, he felt a bit of hope spring up inside of him. Grinning widely, he saw Thomas tilt his head towards Hiccup slightly and the corner of his mouth curled up in a tiny smile. Then the hood obscured his face as he turned back to the other teens.

"Why are you sticking with him?" Snotlout said accusingly, still trying to stay on top of the conversation. "I mean, he's not—he's not!"

"A what?" Thomas crossed his arms and suddenly looked twice as menacing as before, and that was just from the back. Right on cue, there was a faint growl of thunder in the distance. Snotlout clapped his jaw shut and squinted at Thomas, obviously annoyed at being intimidated.

"Nothing," he finally muttered, throwing a final malevolent look at Hiccup before he turned to leave, the twins in tow, still trying to stare at Thomas over their shoulders. Hiccup watched them walk away

down the muddy street.

As Thomas turned around, he brushed off his shirt and muttered, "Serves them right." Then he noticed Hiccup looking up at him. "What?"

He beamed. "You can stay longer if you want to."

A/N: My Thomas/Hiccup brotp chapters get a bit more love than the others so I apologize in advance, I just love this arc too much X3

7. Chapter 6

Merida stopped Angus in the shade of the trees and studied the far-off city of Sydan, a ramshackle warren of traders, rangers and merchants. After a fair few days of hard traveling, she had finally run dry on supplies that she couldn't scavenge from the wilderness. Hence her untimely and reluctant arrival at Sydan. She'd picked the town on account of its small size and temporary inhabitants, but now she was starting to have doubts. Word spread fast in merchant circles, and if someone who recognized her made their way to DunBroch, her family would come swooping down on her like a hawk. That was the last thing she wanted. But she still needed supplies. Merida pursed her lips, weighing her options. Erelis was only a two day's ride from Sydan, but it was a bigger, darker, less hospitable city, and had its fair share of crime.

She leaned over and patted Angus' shoulder. "What d'you say, Angus? Onwar' tae Sydan?"

The massive, shaggy horse shook his mane and began trotting down the road. "Well, then, looks like m'mind's been made up for me." She pulled her hood tighter, trying to conceal her fiery red curls as much as possible. She wasn't trying to disguise herself as a boy, but neither was she looking for unwanted attention. Her northern Cesaret accent would stand out enough. She didn't want to give anyone a reason to remember her.

Thankfully, everything seemed fairly quiet in Sydan-if you could call it that. The motley assortment of mysterious characters didn't pay her much mind as they surged and crowded through the streets bustling quickly to and fro on various hasty errands. It got so that Merida dismounted and led Angus carefully through the town so he wouldn't step on anyone's feet. His large bulk cleared a good path through the crowd. Merida smiled to herself as several people eyed her and her massive steed with varying amounts of surprise. _Didn't think ah could handle such a beast, eh?_ It gave her enormous sense of satisfaction to defy her role as a woman.

Merida avoided venturing too far into the city and risk getting lost; instead, she quickly bought her essentials at the outskirts. As she bartered to bring down the absurdly high price of a sack of oats for Angus, she faintly noticed the stallkeeper's young boy watching her horse with wide blue eyes, blonde curls askew, thumb shoved into the corner of his mouth and plumping out his cheek. He edged closer and closer until Angus took notice of him and snuffled the front of his shirt, making him giggle. He was so alike her triplet brothers that for a moment she felt a pang of homesickness. She paid for the oats

and knelt next to him. Eyes round, he tried shying away.

"Oh, it's all right', wee laddie," she said reassuringly. "Ah won' hurt yu." Pulling her hood back, she touched Angus' nose. "He's a fine horse, isn't he?"

The little boy nodded. "He big," he proclaimed around his thumb. "He tickle me."

"Och, that means he likes yu," Merida shook some oats into her hand. "Here, do yu want tae feed him?"

When he nodded, she gently cupped his hands and the oats trickled into his soft palms. Angus nibbled them up daintily, as though he knew how careful he had to be around such a small child. The boy giggled again as the whiskers brushed his fingers.

"What's yur name?" she said kindly.

"Henry," he said, becoming shy again.

"Well, Henry, ah think yur a right fine lad, an' good with horses tae boot." He grinned as she ruffled his hair and stood.

"Bye-bye, horsey!" he called out, as they retreated into the crowd. Merida smiled to herself. She might be a bit rough with people in general, but she was good with kids.

Suddenly, the back of her neck prickled, as though someone were watching her. She glanced around, but it was impossible to tell if someone was following her or not. Her hesitation caused Angus to bump into her, and he snorted in protest. "Sorry, Angus," she said in a low voice. "Joost watch ma back fer me, eh?"

He whickered and they kept moving, more cautiously this time as Merida scanned the unfamiliar faces surrounding her. Her sudden apprehension made them all seem hostile and suspicious. Heart thundering, she nervously pulled down the edges of her hood around her face, still feeling the sting of watchful eyes at her back, driving her forward like a ship in a stormy gale. Then she realized that the watched feeling was growing stronger, like a hot pulse surging beneath her skin. _What's goin' on?_

Suddenly she spotted someone leaning against a storefront, casual as anything. The hood of a sleeveless robe was up over his head, but Merida could see tufts of silver hair poking out, and there were jet-black tribal tattoos inked on his arms. Merida knew that meant he was an Islander, one of the natives of the Southern Isles and a fairly primitive group of people. That wasn't what drew Merida's eye to him, though. Some instinct within her said that this was the man who was following her. She was even more sure when he looked up and stared directly at her with bright green eyes. She caught her breath and tried to hurry past him, but his hand shot out suddenly and grabbed her shoulder. His grip seemed unnaturally strong; he managed to pull her halfway into the alley they were next to.

"Excuse me," she said tersely, stopping and trying to pull away. Angus came up beside her and rumbled, regarding the Islander with rolling eyes. People flooded around them, barely glancing at the scene unfolding before them. The man was silent at first, still

scrutinizing her, and Merida pulled out of his grip angrily. Who does this scaffbag think 'e is? He let her go, but his eyes shifted to something behind her, and before she could whirl around, something was shoved over her head, a rough fabric material that she realized was a large bag. She tried to thrash and scream but her arms were pinned to her sides and the bag muffled her cries. Somewhere outside of her confinements she heard Angus crying out and stamping, trying to reach her, but his neighs grew distant as she was picked up and hauled away from the noisy crowd, completely helpless.

Well, there goes all mah plans.

****A/N: A cookie to anyone who guesses who the Islander is!****

8. Chapter 7

Rapunzel hovered over Flynn's shoulder nervously as he knelt at the door of the tower, tongue sticking out, fiddling with the lock by sticking some bent metal sticks. She grasped the cold metal handle of her frying pan under her arm, running a finger along its bumpy edge. Flynn had said he was doing something called "picking the lock," whatever that meant, but right now Rapunzel was not seeing any results come of the jiggling and poking.

"How about now?" she pressed.

Flynn's shoulders sagged, the little sticks paused, and he rolled his head back to sigh at the ceiling. "Blondie," he said, in a would-be patient voice, "are we opening the door?"

"...No."

"Are we outside?"

"No."

"Then no, I haven't gotten it yet."

Within the last hour, the rain-choked clouds had passed and there was a bright thick beam of sunlight splashing across the floor, reflecting off of whatever was on the ground and smearing the walls with a myriad of bright glows-the orange of the tile floor, the blue of the rug, the pink paint on the fireplace. The hot sun burned the stone walls and floor and a dusty smell seemed to be steaming from the exposed surfaces. Dust motes drifted quietly through the air, stirring as Flynn huffed in frustration, missing his mark with the sticks again.

"Sorry," she said again after a few minutes. "I didn't think it would take this long."

Flynn said nothing, and there was another moment of silence. Rapunzel was trying to think of something else to say to fill the emptiness when the lock finally clunked and the door squealed open, leading to a set of hot, stuffy, dank stairs, spiraling downwards into dimness. She beamed and bounced on her tiptoes, causing the satchel over her shoulder to swing. It was Flynn's and she had persuaded him to let her keep the crown inside. The hostage in question was wrapped in cloth to keep it clean and undamaged. It really was a pretty thing,

Rapunzel thought admiringly. When Flynn wasn't looking, she had tried to determine its use. She knew it was a called crown, but that was all she knew. It was too big for her arm, and the glass crystals framed in gold were faceted and didn't work as something to look through. Eventually she would find out its true purpose. Rapunzel was too shy to ask him what it was for, and she knew he would only respond with something along the lines of "have you been locked in here your whole life?" While the answer was yes, she didn't want to reveal to Flynn any more than she had to. Her mother had always hinted that Rapunzel was "special" and that people would come after her if they knew about her. The fear had been instilled early into her heart and she was hesitant to tell Flynn about it.

The pair began descending the stairs, Rapunzel lifting her skirts to place her bare feet on the warm stone, Flynn waving his hand in front of his face to clear the dust that drifted up from the cramped space. "You don't get out much, do you?" Flynn noted.

"Uh...no, not really," she replied truthfully. She was a bit distracted in her response; her heart was thrumming like a guitar string as they got closer and closer to the ground. Rapunzel was about to touch the ground for the first time in her life. What would the grass feel like? Would everything look bigger? Would she feel small next to her imposing tower? The questions piled and piled the further down they went and it took all of her energy to stay nonchalant in front of Flynn. He eyed her but said nothing else, only keeping a mystified smirk on his face.

The door, with a pale glow filtering through the edges and cracks, came into view and she stopped suddenly. Flynn looked at her incredulously. "Well, come on, blondie. Door's that way."

"I don't know," she whispered, hugging the frying pan close. The man shrugged, pushing the door open and letting in a flood of sunlight.

"Well, you know where the tower is. It's forwards or backwards. Let me know when you're ready." And with that, he sauntered outside, stretching in the sunlight and rubbing the back of his head, which was probably still sore from Rapunzel's cheap shot. She rocked back and forth on the balls of her feet, still debating wildly within herself what to do. It had seemed like a good idea at the time, but risking Gothel's anger? Would running away be worth it?

No. That's the reason I have to go. I have to get away from here.

With a deep breath, she moved forward, lightly touching the door's frame as she walked out into the world for the first time in her life. The streaming sunlight blinded her for a moment and she stood in awe as everything came into focus. There was the ground! The grass and the dirt! And she was finally under the trees instead of over them! It was a strange feeling, but an exhilarating one all the same. Rapunzel smiled brightly and walked out of the shadow of the tower, her only home. But soon her walking turned to jogging and her jogging to running and all at once she was racing towards the cave on the opposite side of the cove, laughing, her hair streaming out behind her like a bright gold banner. She could hear Flynn calling for her to wait up but she wanted to see what was outside of the little world she had always lived in-

Suddenly a hand grabbed her shoulder, just as she reached the ivy-covered tunnel, and she skidded to a stop with her toes brushing the edge of a sharp downward drop. Rapunzel cried out and fell backwards on top of Flynn, the one who had stopped her from falling to her death. They struggled awkwardly for a few seconds, trying to get untangled. Gasping, she rolled to a sitting position and stared over the edge of the cliff, clutching her frying pan tightly.

"Didn't you hear me, Rapunzel?" Flynn panted, getting to his feet. "Sheesh, no wonder you haven't left the tower, you were ready to throw yourself off a mountain."

"I didn't know," she replied defensively, peeking out at the wide expanse of trees and the small steeping of rooftops in the distance, her adrenaline subsiding and replaced with excitement once more. "Oh, but look how big it is! How far is it to Traum? Which way? How are we going to get down?"

"Easy, there. One question at a time. We'll take the long way," he said decisively, brushing the dirt off of his already-dirty shirt. "Up north until the cliff gets smaller. I get the feeling that we should take baby steps." He smiled at her, more genuinely than before. "After all, you've only started walking."

A/N: Couldn't make it exactly like the movie, could I? Had to throw some mortal peril in there. :)

9. Chapter 8

"Left hand."

Hiccup leaped in surprised and fumbled his practice sword, dropping it in the dirt with a nerve-scraping rattle. Embarrassed, he spun around to see a dark, hooded figure leaning against the wall of Gobber's shop, watching his pathetic attempts to practice in his spare time. He was determined to become just as good at fighting as anyone else on Berk, but he was never given the chance to improve. He was always working on some project Gobber had for him-or most likely created for him, to keep him out of trouble. Hence his off-time miming. He hadn't expected Thomas to arrive to watch the show, though. Over the past week, the stranger had taken to quietly observing the village and its surroundings, often disappearing for hours at a time to wander the surrounding woods. But he always came back, and he often did it in surprising and even unnerving ways, randomly appearing around corners and houses, occasionally showing up for community events, lurking in the shadows with his always-present hood and cloak. The village didn't approve of his antisocial behavior, deeming it irregular and suspicious. Hiccup never felt threatened by him, though. He enjoyed Thomas' company, having had no close friends for most of his life. The man would make conversation with him at meals, when no one else would even look at Hiccup.

"Thomas!" Hiccup exclaimed. "Wait, what did you say?"

"You're fighting with your right hand; you should switch," he replied. "You're left-handed when you draw and write and work in the

shop, aren't you?"

"Yeahâ€¦" Hiccup bent down and picked up the sword. "It's just...well, everyone else fights right-handed, so I thoughtâ€¦" He trailed off, and Thomas walked forward, gently took the hilt of the sword, and pressed it into Hiccup's left hand.

"It's okay to be different, Hiccup," he said quietly. "If you play it right, your differences can become your greatest strengths. Which hand would an average swordsman expect you to use?"

"Uh, right?"

Thomas nodded. "And if that swordsman had a shield, which arm would he put it on?"

Hiccup thought briefly. "Left. His left, my right." Suddenly he made the connection. "But if I'm left-handed, he'd have to swing his shield around to defend himself, and then he couldn't attack as well as he normally could." He glanced up at Thomas. "Right?"

"Right," Thomas affirmed with a smile. "Or, should I say, left?"

Grinning, Hiccup hefted the unfamiliar weight, rolling it around. "Okay, I'll try it."

"Hiccup!" Gobber stood in the doorway of the smithy. "I need yer 'ands fer a minute." He eyed Thomas suspiciously before turning and disappearing inside. Hiccup looked at Thomas and shrugged, heading for the doorway.

"What do you need, Gobber?" he said as he walked in. Outside, he noticed Thomas melting away into the village.

Gobber eyed him. "Frida's axe just came in, the regular clean-up. And I'll need yer ears as much as yer hands, if ya don't mind."

"Okayâ€¦" Hiccup hefted the dinged axe off the wall and set it on the workbench. "What is it? Does Dad have something awkward to tell me that he can't say in person?"

"No, not this time. I just wanted ta ask ya-you still carry that head on yer shoulders, yeah?"

"As far as I know." He detached the head from the haft. "Why?"

"Just checkin'. And you still have yer brains in that head, am I right?"

Frowning at Gobber, Hiccup paused in his work. "Excuse me?"

The old blacksmith lowered his voice, glancing out the window. "Look, I'll just say it righ' now-I don' like the look o' this Thomas character. He's no business bein' in Berk; all 'e does is sneak round an' spy on us. I'd be careful if I were you."

Irritated, Hiccup turned away and plopped the axe head onto the hot coals. "Thanks for the memo. I'll keep that in mind if he tries to

lure me away with a trail of breadcrumbs."

"Hiccup, I'm bein' serious."

"So am I! In fact, I think he might be a draconian!" he snorted.
"Let's go sharpen our swords!"

But the sarcasm fell dead, and Gobber simply stared at him grimly.
Hiccup's stomach went cold.

"Um, he's not a draconian...right?" he said
half-jokingly.

"Anything's possible," said Gobber darkly, switching his file
attachment for his hammer. Hiccup stared at him.

"That's ridiculous!" he said incredulously. "Draconians are big and
scaly with tails and claws andâ€¦" He fell silent as the possibility
sank in. "No. No, he couldn't be," he decided.

"Believe what ya want. I'm just sayin' ya look awful close ta him.
I'd hate ta see somethin' happen ta you because ya weren't payin'
attention."

"Believe me, you're probably the only one who'd mourn if something
did happen," Hiccup said dryly. The blade of the axe glowed a ruddy
orange as he heaved it onto the anvil with a pair of long clamps,
holding it in place as Gobber began to pound the dents out.

"Well," Gobber huffed between blows, "it just seems odd that 'e would
single you out, of all people."

Hiccup pressed his lips together. "So what you're saying is that
there must be a reason he wanted to be my friend, because nobody
would bother getting to know me otherwise?"

Gobber shrugged. "Yer not the most approachable fella in
Berk."

"Gee, thanks." They worked in silence for a few minutes, alternately
hammering the axe blade and dousing it in cold water. "Okay, if it
makes you feel better, I can ask him," Hiccup pointed out.

"Ya can't expect him ta give up 'is secrets so easily. Ya gotta
wrestle them from 'im, take 'em from behind 'is back!" He swung his
hammer through the air, nearly braining Hiccup, who ducked and looked
at him in alarm.

"Or I could check the Dragon Book," he said carefully, and Gobber
nodded sagely.

"Aye, there's that, too," he said thoughtfully.

* * *

><p>It was after dinner, after dark. The Great Hall was empty, as
everyone else had gone back to their homes to weather out a second
storm that had decided to spill its guts. The cavernous room echoed
with the occasional bang of thunder, and lightning glared through the
cracks of the huge doors in shimmering blue arcs. The few candles

Hiccup had lit barely brushed the walls and their bloody tapestries, hanging thick and dusty over the gray stone walls. As he passed them, he lifted his candle higher, scanning the woven images. Gaudy colors and exaggerated figures depicted gory battles between the Kunnians and groups of snarling monsters, humanoid in shape with twisting tails and glaring dragon heads and huge bat wings. There was no resemblance between Thomas and the wild draconians depicted that Hiccup had grown up around. He wondered how Gobber had ever made a connection. Well, Hiccup wasn't one to judge draconian or not. He'd never seen one in real life, and he figured that Gobber had seen lots. Leaving the tapestries, Hiccup headed for the long tables, where the Dragon Book lay.<p>

Everything that the Berkians knew about dragons and draconians was found in the timeworn leather-bound book. The true dragons had gone away years ago; whether extinct or in hiding, nobody knew for sure. The draconians were still around, half-dragon people with an appetite for fresh meat and fresh humans. News of draconian attacks traveled to Berk every day from all corners of Kunnia, carried by various merchants and couriers, and with every report, a little more was added to the Dragon Book. Years and years of knowledge were compounded in this stack of paper.

Hiccup sat and pried open the heavy leather cover, the smell of soil and smoke staining its yellowed pages. Skipping through a few hastily scribbled introductions, he arrived at a kind of general overview, skimming it for pieces of information.

Draconians have existed since before...occupied Oreka in a small group...mindless insensate beasts...in their attempts to oppress humans â€| out for blood â€| bloodthirsty â€| battle-hungry â€| kill â€| killing â€| slaughterâ€| KILL ON SIGHT ...

He began leafing through the pages, scanning the wealth of images and descriptions for anything that sounded familiar. There were kinds that had thick bumpy hides and who ate rocks to boil into their stomachs for firepower. Some had razor-sharp spines that they could launch from their tails like arrows, filled with a deadly poison. Some swam, some lit themselves on fire, some could even camouflage themselves. At the end of each section was an ominous addendum: Extremely dangerous; kill on sight. Out of all the breeds listed in the book, not one of them seemed to fit Thomas. He was about to give up the search and claim his triumph when the book fluttered open to the very last pages, which were almost blank, except for a few lines of runes.

Night Fury. Speed unknown. Size unknown.

The unholy offspring of lightning and death itself. Never engage this draconian.

Your only chance: hide and pray it does not find you.

"Hiccup?"

His heart seemed to buck suddenly and stop working; whirling around, he saw someone standing in the doors of the hall, silhouetted in a flash of lightning. The dying firelight revealed a blurry glimpse of Thomas' surprised face as he stood hunched in the pouring rain, water

dripping off of the edges of his cloak. "What are you doing in here?" he said in concern, as Hiccup hurriedly shut the Dragon Book.

"Nothing!" Hiccup nearly yelped. "No, I just, uhâ€¦" He patted the book awkwardly, like he would an animal. "Reading."

"Ah." His eyes lingered on the worn leather cover and Hiccup slid his hand further up, obscuring the title. "Well, I thought I would come tell you that your father is searching for you."

Hiccup's stomach dropped. "H-he is?" It was never a good sign when his dad was actively searching him out. He regretfully slid the book off the table, making sure to hug it close and avoid letting Thomas see it. Walking quickly over to the massive entrance hall doors, he stared out at the gushing rain. "Here goes nothing," he muttered.

"Wait." Thomas lifted a corner of his cloak, providing a cover from the storm. Hiccup ducked under it gratefully and they began trekking across the village, hunched over against the drizzling water. Thomas was tall enough to keep the cloak from even touching Hiccup's head; the drops simply hit the thick fabric and rolled off the edges in a shining stream. It was cold, but the shivers Hiccup received were a different kind of chill. His mind kept returning to the nearly-blank page at the end of the manual, and its strangely vague message. A small part of him couldn't help but wonder.

"What were you reading?" Thomas asked out of the blue, shielding his eyes as a gust of wind sprayed them with rain.

"It's just a...wellâ€¦" Hiccup trailed off as he realized that now was his chance. "It's about draconians," he finished casually, watching Thomas for any reaction.

"Oh?"

"Mm-hmm."

"What about them?"

Still nothing so far. "Pretty much everything." They turned down a fork in the village road and approached Hiccup's house in the distance, windows alight with an auburn glow that was dimmed and blurred by the rain. "Where they live, their natural weapons, how they attack and how long they liveâ€¦"

"Fascinating," Thomas said musingly, appraising him with a curious look. "You'll have to inform me about these creatures. I have no love for the draconians in my homeland."

"Your homeland?" Hiccup's scheming was thrown off-track. "Where's that?"

"Far to the north, beyond the borders of both Traum and Kosmaria. I was wronged by them many years ago. I haven't returned since."

"I'm sorry."

They paused in the middle of the runny road, tented under the cloak,

sizing each other up without acknowledging the other that they were doing so. But they were both aware of the scrutiny. Draconian or not, Thomas knew something was up, and so Hiccup tried to look as blank and serious as possible. Then, rather surprisingly, the stranger smiled, tilting his head sideways.

"You're an odd one, Hiccup," he commented.

Under other circumstances, Hiccup would have been offended, but something about the way Thomas delivered the statement made him simply smirk and shake his head. "So I've been told," he said.

"I should hope so. What I mean to say isâ€¦" He hesitated and his smile faded. "Don't be ashamed of it. Don't let anyone make you think that's a bad thing, Hiccup."

Hiccup was surprisingly touched by the words. "I, uh...yeah, I will. I mean, I won't." How strange it was to receive a compliment for once, and a sincere one at that. Everyone in the village had always seemed intent on tearing him down, but Thomas...Thomas was always trying to build him up. If he really was a draconian, he wasn't doing a very good job of keeping a low profile in Berk, that was for sure. But Hiccup didn't mind. Having someone this close to him felt good.

Of course, there was the small problem that Thomas could possibly be a bloodthirsty killing machine, he thought with a rush of uneasiness. Gobber might have a point. Perhaps he was getting close to Hiccup for other reasons besides friendship. Realizing that his face had become too open, too expressive, he closed it off behind the always-present cynical, noncommittal mask. "I should probably go," he said.

"Right." Thomas dropped his intense gaze and let the cloak fall around him as Hiccup stepped out into the downpour, keeping the book dry underneath his vest. They stood in silence for a few seconds more. Hiccup blinked as the rain ran down his hair and dripped off the ends, tickling his cheeks with cold water. He couldn't just leave like that. Whatever fragile bond he'd forged a moment ago was about to break.

"Hey." Thomas glanced up at Hiccup's quick word. "We, uh...Iâ€¦" He shrugged, waving his hands vaguely, unsure of what to say. How to put their odd and sudden friendship into words. "Thanks," he finally managed to say.

The stranger half-smiled and dipped his head. "You're welcome, Hic." Hiccup smiled at the nickname and turned, trudging through the muddy ground back to his house, glowing softly in the storm. It may have been hasty and brief, and he may not have said everything he wanted to, but he hoped he had conveyed nonverbally what he hadn't in words. That they were now friends.

And if he wasn't mistaken, Thomas had said the very same thing.

A/N: Gee, I wonder what he could be...XD Comments appreciated and welcomed!

10. Chapter 9

Jack knew he was in trouble as soon as he saw the wanted signs.

It was a cold, misty, rainy day. The flat gray clouds appeared as a solid ceiling of dark fog, hanging so low that the mountains in the distances tabbed through their heavy bellies. It was only at these times that Jack wished he had shoes. The rain turned the rough, pebbly dust of the main roads into a thick, glutinous ooze that slopped between his toes and up his ankles. He longed for a river or a pond to scrub himself clean-well, less dirty, as it were- but it would be a while before he could afford the luxury of stopping. Guards were tenacious things. He was fairly sure he was still in Ira and he wanted to get out as soon as possible.

Up ahead was the outskirts of a good-sized town, not big enough to have Noctis guards patrolling its streets, but not so small that everyone was related and gossip spread like wildfire and everyone's sixth sense went off every time the population strayed from the norm. He'd been to towns like that. He was pretty sure the people of Burgess were still telling their children about the strange white-haired boy ghosting through their village, months after he'd gone there on a false lead from a robber. Jack vowed never to trust the pale-faced, yellow-eyed Toby Tallstick ever again.

The road into town was watched over by two armored men that were obviously soaked and chilled to the bone. Water ran in crystalline rivulets down the gleaming metal plates and dripped down dark blue tunics. Jack felt a flash of sympathy, wishing that everyone could be as resistant to cold as he was. He joined the trickle of people seeking shelter from the storm, nervously tugging his hood lower and dipping his head to avoid eye contact with the sentinels. Couldn't be too careful.

The rickety outskirts became sturdier and more intimidating the farther he ventured into town. Curls of steam and smoke drifted overhead from various chimneys and skylights and cracked-open doors and windows. Everyone soaked in the rain, but also stayed out of its way. Few dared to walk the muddy streets, people with turned-up collars and broad hats that streamed with rainwater. The downpour made the buildings ahead look hazy and blurred. Whenever someone hurried by, Jack planted his staff in the ground like a walking stick or a shepherd's crook, but as soon as they passed, he returned to holding it horizontally like the weapon it was.

After an hour of searching, Jack found what he'd come for: a town notice board, sheltered from the rain with various official-looking documents nailed to the splintery, weathered wood. It stood in the middle of the town square, a lonely little affair with puddles of rippling water dabbing the cobblestone in smears of translucent brown. A large building, sturdier and more impressive than the rest, dominated the left side of the square. It was probably a town meeting hall or some such. A limp Iran flag dangled from the eaves, a coppery dragon with two spears shining dully on a black field, water dripping off of the dark corners. Jack cast a quick glance around to look for unfriendly eyes. Seeing nobody, he stepped up to the board. With a sinking feeling, he found what he'd managed to escape for a long time-a wanted poster. His wanted poster. His likeness had been captured in a few swift strokes, along with a brief description of himself. Jack only knew how to read a little, but from what he could

decipher he found out that he was to be captured alive; the reward was a handsome amount. The poster also labeled him as an extremely dangerous mage, but he disregarded that part. It was only because they saw him wind walking. Still, to be wanted alive was a strange feeling. And the poster was from Noctis, not Corona. _That's odd. It's Corona that wants the crown back. I've never caused enough trouble in Kosmaria to be wanted by Pitch Black himself._

He shook his head and took down the poster, tossing it into a puddle. The ink smeared across the paper, distorting his face. As an afterthought, he took down Flynn's poster as well, several of which had been up all over the two countries for a while. Flynn was always complaining about the position of his nose in each picture. It was something that Jack loved to needle him about. Looking at Flynn's cocky smile, Jack felt a pang of loneliness. _I hope he's still OK._ He let the paper float to the street, where it wrinkled and twisted as it grew sodden with water. He tipped his head back and let the rain trickle down his face.

I'm being hunted.

He'd managed to stay out of both Kosmarian and Traum clutches for so long. Now he was wanted and he didn't even know why. What did Pitch Black, the most powerful man in Kosmaria, want with an amnesiac thief off the street? Did it have something to do with his past? _What do I do if they catch me? Should I just go with them and see what Pitch wants?_

Should I just leave Flynn like that?

The storm of emotions surged inside of him, one part aching for an easy way out, the other stubbornly refusing to leave his friend's side. He brushed the conflict aside for now. _I'll worry about it when we get there._

Squaring his shoulders, Jack stepped back out into the pouring rain, heading towards the north end of town and to the shadowy lands beyond.

A/N: I'm not posting a week early, what are you talking about. You're crazy. short chapter is short.

**ahahaha. I just wanted to advertise a little bit here, I have the fanfic's regular tumblr (mages-ascendant . tumblr . com) and I just created a new ask blog! ask-mages-ascendant . tumblr . com Please feel free to drop by and ask one of the characters any question you want! (hehe just keep it appropriate and spoiler-free) ^.^

**

Thank you so much for all of the follows, I promise you won't be disappointed!

11. Chapter 10

A/N: okay, yeah, it's been a while :P apologies for that, I needed to get away from the story for a bit. Plus I had my muse quite stimulated by an amazing roleplay group :3 hope ya like what i got! Merry Christmas everyone!

Merida was furious.

This was the exact opposite of what she had in mind.

She'd given up fighting against the sack ages ago. Inside her airless, stuffy confines, all of her efforts to struggle and shout were ignored. She wasn't beaten or chastened, but neither did anyone explain to her what was happening or where she was being taken, and that absolutely riled her. So Merida simply fumed. Her kidnapper changed positions from time to time-over his shoulder, cradling her, over his other shoulder. They seemed to be moving quite rapidly without tiring, and it had been forever since she heard any other people. She expected him to slow and grow tired, or at least stop and rest, but they had been moving nonstop for...it must have been hours. It wasn't being taken far away from home that worried her-it was the fact that she was being taken far away and she had no clue where she was.

For the hundredth time, she fretted over Angus. She couldn't hear him anywhere, and it didn't feel like the man was pulling anything behind him. He'd be lost, and nervous, and maybe even scared without her. After all, he was just a horse.

Merida kicked her legs and got another rough adjustment, the same as always. But this time, the man finally spoke.

"Will ya knock it off, sheila?"

"Excuse me?" she snapped back, equally offended and surprised at the fact that he finally spoke after being silent for so long.

"Quit yankin' around. It's hard enough work luggin' ya across the countryside. Ya don't have to make it so hard on me."

"Hard on _yu?"_ she said, scandalized.

"I've got a job to do, kid, and thrashing ain't gonna make it easier for either of us. Right, here we are." He stopped moving and released her with one of his arms, still keeping a firm hold on her.

"Will yu put me down now?"

"Not a chance. Hold on tight, miss."

She opened her mouth to protest again, but with a sudden rush, the man apparently leapt off of some precipice and they plunged straight downwards, all sense of gravity lost. The light that had been filtering through the bag went out and she was in complete darkness. Merida cried out initially and then bit it off, ashamed for screaming in front of a man. The weightlessness lasted for a few seconds. With a jerk, the man landed on his feet and Merida bumped against his shoulder, gasping at the sudden landing and how bitterly cold it had instantly become. _Are we underground? What happened?_

Merida was very abruptly and unceremoniously dropped to the ground. As she struggled to untangle herself, she could hear voices surrounding her, a fair distance away, discussing in hushed voices what was to be done about the new arrival. "She is all right? Did she fight you?"

"Nah, mate. I got around her as soon as she caught sight o' me."

"Well, you didn't hurt her, did you, Aster?"

"You think I'm some kind of thug? No, I didn't bloody beat her!"

She finally disengaged herself and got to her feet in a huff, reaching for her strung bow and arrow. But the sight of her kidnappers made her freeze in shocked confusion.

There, of course, was the green-eyed man. Now that she wasn't being rushed along in a crowd, she got a better look at his dusty, rumpled clothing, silvery hair, and scuffed leather bracers. Hanging from the front of his belt was a square piece of decorative cloth, embroidered with an elaborate triangular symbol and various plantlike designs. He was brushing off his cloak in a cool, casual manner, regarding her flatly as though she was just another piece of business he had to take care of. And maybe she was.

The other man was considerably...different, to say the least. He was tall, taller than Lord Fergus, with a long white beard, bushy eyebrows, a scarlet tunic and thick muscles. A curved sword hung from his belt but overall, his demeanor was cheerful and nonthreatening. A bit too cheerful for Merida's taste, especially given her current mood.

The strangest one there was a half-bird, half-woman who was hovering above the ground with blurring iridescent wings. She was covered in shining green and violet feathers everywhere except her face and hands. She kept herself modest with loose, brightly colored cloth, despite being coated in feathers.

"What d'yu lot of clatty mingers think yu're doin'?! " Merida exploded.

The Islander held out a hand. "Oi, lassie, calm down."

"Calm down?" she fumed. "Yu righ' kidnapped me, yu can take yur calm and stick it up yur-"

"All right!" To the leader, he muttered under his breath, "This was an awful idea, mate."

"On contrary," the bearded man said uncomfortably, "this was only way we could get her to come."

"Right well it was the only way!" she snorted. "Ah'd never come with yu lot!" Glancing around, her stomach suddenly dropped and she added, with growing fear, "Where's mah horse got to? Where's Angus?"

"He's fine, mate. We brought him with."

"Ah want tae see 'im," she said stubbornly.

The silver-haired man rolled his eyes and gestured with a gauntlet-clad hand at the window. "See for yourself."

Keeping an eye on her kidnappers, she edged to the large window and leaned up onto her tiptoes, putting her hands delicately on the

rough, splintery wooden windowsill. There was a kind of courtyard outside, ringed by floors of railings and doors and stone, and down at the bottom, there was a little section partitioned off by wooden slat fences, forming a ramshackle stable in which a few horses munched idly. All except one.

Merida exhaled in relief as she spotted her massive Clydesdale pacing back and forth, tossing his head anxiously. She knew he was fretting but at least she knew he was safe and nearby. "Fine. I believe yu."

"All right, perhaps we start over, then. Yes?"

Merida curled her lip. "Aye. Perhaps we should."

"Good!" The large man jabbed a thumb into his chest. "They call me Nicholas St. North-eh, just North, for short." When she nodded curtly, he gestured at the two others standing behind him, her kidnapper and the strange bird-woman. "This is Aster, from the Southern Isles, and Tooth, of the Northern Woods."

Merida gave them a look. "Tooth? As in...a champin' tooth? The kind yu eat with? That's a story ah'll have ta hear." She pursed her lips. "Or maybe ah won't. Because ah'll be out the door. Gettin' awae from yu kidnappers." She turned to stalk out despite not having a clue where she was.

"Merida, wait." Tooth flitted forward, iridescent feathers flashing. "I don't think you understand quite what it is we do."

"Help me understand, then!" she huffed.

"You see, we picked you because we saw you had a gift."

"Ain't tha' joost dandy. An' what gift is this?"

"Well...have you ever heard of a mage?"

"O' course, ah mean-who hasn't?" Something wasn't quite right here. There was no reason to be telling her about mages...unless...

"Wait." Merida ran a hand through her hair and then held it out, "Ach, joost hold on a minute heere."

North suddenly gave a booming laugh, causing everyone to jump, and spread his arms theatrically. "Surprise!"

Merida frowned and twisted her mouth. "Now hold on!" she said loudly. "Yu've picked up th' wrong lass, ah can't use magic. At all."

"Well, of course you can't right now," Aster said matter-of-factly. "Got to get ya tested and whatnot."

"Tested?" She was immediately wary of the ominous-sounding word.

"It's no big deal," Tooth said reassuringly. "The test focuses your energy and tells you what element you're best suited for. It's not hard at all."

It still sounded crazy, but Merida was liking the idea more and more with each passing minute. It sounded like the exact opposite of being a lady, having elemental powers, the entire country knowing and respecting who she was-without the prissy lessons. This motley cast of characters still made her wary, though. "So why all of yu?"

"We," North said proudly, "are Guardians. Guardians of Traum, to be exact. We protect the people of this land from danger, we answer to King and Queen only."

"What kind o' danger?" she said curiously.

"We've had our share of almost everything," Aster replied. "Thieves, thugs, bandits, criminals, illegal trade rings, the like. But we also stand against bigger threats."

"Like what?"

Aster glanced uncomfortably at North, and he gestured for Aster to continue. The Islander exhaled and pulled out one of his boomerangs, twirling it around his fingers. "Something bad's coming, mate," he finally said. "And we can't do it by ourselves. We need your help."

"And it's not just you," Tooth added. "We received word that there would be four of you, destined to stand up to this new threat."

"What kind of threat?"

Aster leaned against the wall, crossing his arms. "You've heard of Pitch Black, haven't ya?"

"O' course," she replied, mildly affronted. "Everyone's heard o' Pitch."

"And I suppose you don't know much about him?"

"Wellâ€¦" Merida hesitated. Now that she thought about it, she couldn't specify anything she'd heard about Pitch. There were rumors, of course, but nothing confirmed so far as she had heard. "Nobody really does, do they?"

"True enough. Yes, Pitch has been very quiet these past years, and we haven't had to worry about him lately. Besides, y'know, all of the border-blocking and whatnot. But we caught wind that he's up to something bad, really bad. And that's why we need you."

"Well, tha's not much clearer than what yu said before," Merida said accusingly.

North spread his hands. "We cannot give out much information. Pitch is watching, sometimes all the time, sometimes not at all. We can never tell. And so we cannot tell you more unless you wish to join us."

The redhead pursed her lips. "An' if ah say no?"

"Then we've already lost," Tooth said seriously. "The four of the

prophecy are the only ones who can stop Pitch from bringing harm to Kosmaria and Traum."

"Well, then." She ran a finger over her bow, thinking hard. Where else did she have to go, really? What were her options? Return home? Not in a million years. Leave and find another city? Fat chance she would get another opportunity like this. And the notion that she had been foreordained to a destiny such as this-it appealed to the part of her that had always been searching for her fate. Perhaps this was where she was meant to be. Besides, it wasn't like she was signing a permanent contract. A few days in and she would see where they stood. If the arrangement didn't appear to be profitable, she could always run away again. She eyed everyone in the room before sighing and putting her hands on her hips.

"A'right, then, where do we start?"

Aster was taken aback. "Wha-well, that was bloody fast."

Merida shrugged. "Ah've got nothin' better tae do."

The sky nymph looked less than pleased with her reasoning, but North laughed loudly and swung his hands in the air like he was signaling someone ten miles away. Aster yelped and ducked, avoiding getting brained by one of the man's massive forearms. "Prokofiev!" he exclaimed gleefully. "Welcome aboard!"

And despite all of her misgivings, Merida smiled a bit.

"Ah'm supposed tae do what, now?"

"Look, it doesn't make any sense now, but it will when you go in. Trust me."

Merida narrowed her eyes at Aster. "Been doin' a little too much o' that, lately."

"Will ya just go in, sheila?"

They stood outside of an ironbound door, bringing an end to the long, rail-straight hallway on the fifth floor. The sun was setting outside, throwing stripes of scarlet-orange light across the flagstoned floor and the tapestried walls and the thick wooden beams. Mussing his silver hair, Aster dropped his hands and sighed. "I promise it's nothing dangerous. You just have to be in there by yourself or it won't work correctly."

"Ah'm supposed to touch some scaffy crystal and yu won't tell me what it does?"

"You wanna be a Guardian or not, kid?"

Merida wrinkled her nose at him. "All right. Fine. Let me in."

With a sigh of exasperation, Aster put a hand on the door and held it there for a moment; it creaked open into a dark hallway. "Good luck."

Steeling herself with a steadying breath, Merida strode forward, and the door shut firmly behind her with a soft bang. It was dim, but not

completely black, and Merida made her way down the narrow hallway, trying to calm her racing heart. She was a wild combination of anxious and eager, unsure exactly which emotion dominated the other. Breathing deeply, she shook out her arms and stretched her back muscles, the same routine she went through before hunting to keep her hands from shaking.

She reached the end of the hallway and it blossomed into a large circular room covered in rings of strange-looking runes. In the very center was a chest-high pedestal, simple and carved from rough wood. The top of it meshed and bubbled into a large, straight-faceted translucent crystal, which was softly reflecting the last rays of the fading sun. Tilting her head up, Merida saw a hole in the roof, giving a completely unrestricted view of the quickly darkening sky. There was a sheen of clouds over the rising moon; it looked murky and blurry from where she stood. Her mouth had fallen open slightly as she looked up and she clapped it shut, looking around and pressing her fingers together, rubbing the pads idly. Apparently from what Aster had said, she was supposed to touch it. What it was going to do to her, she had no clue.

Merida shrugged, shaking off her silly childhood fears. _It's joost touchin'. It isn't goin' tae hurt me._

She cautiously reached out to it and hesitated a breath before pushing forward with determination and making contact.

The clouds must have suddenly parted because the moon blazed down in a white stream of light, striking the crystal and nearly blinding Merida with its brilliance. Squinting, she saw fragments of luminescent blue light dancing across the walls, illuminating the curved rough stone and dark crossbeams. Her hand had disappeared in a shining nimbus. Something warm flooded into her, searching her, and she looked up at the moon with wide eyes as it hovered above the room, shedding its light into her soul. The energy withdrew and then the light began to re-form, making a more solid form over her hand. There was a rushing noise, and then the glow disappeared-all of it, that is, except the figure shifting and flickering in the very center of the room. It was almost like a wisp in the way it was strangely blue and ethereal, but it wasn't a wisp. It was...a flame.

Fire.

A thundering knowledge burst through her being and Merida yanked her hand off the crystal as her palms suddenly grew hot. Gasping, she stared down at them as the tips of her fingers alit like coals in a fireplace, but...it didn't hurt. It was a part of her. When she pulled them closer to look, they went out just like that. Merida watched them for a few more seconds, breathing hard. _What joost happenedâ€|?_

Well, unless she was very much mistaken, she had just been tested.

Beginning to smile, she turned on her heel and strode for the door, leaving the moon to fade into fuzzy oblivion.

****A/N:** Here's to hoping that an extra-long suspenseful chapter will re-start my uploading. Once again, roleplaying every day has helped a TON with my writing and confidence, so I hope you guys enjoy the ride, it gets better from here, I promise XD**

Standing up and stretching to ease the cramps in his back, Hiccup surveyed the repairs he'd made to Gunnar's wagon. The crippled wheel had been bent and sawn back into place. The task of fixing the wagon had fallen to Hiccup as Gobber's apprentice, since the blacksmith was across the village in the boatyard. He gathered his satchel of tools and brushed the sawdust off of his best. The sun had gone down almost an hour ago and night was falling in cool blue tones across Berk and Lake Evindell. Kurak, the dragon constellation, was beginning to speckle the sky to the west. Hiccup began to head for home.

Walking briskly among the dirt roads and wooden flats of the village, Hiccup reflected on how much things had changed since Thomas had come to Berk. The mysterious stranger was polite and friendly to everyone he met, but the only solid friendship he'd formed was with Hiccup. He enjoyed Thomas' company. He had so many stories to tell about the people and places he'd seen, and he continued to give Hiccup swordfighting tips. But an even greater benefit to being friends with Thomas was that it kept the bullies away. Having a six-foot lean Kosmarian swordsman on his side heightened the odds in his favor considerably if Snotlout decided to pick a fight. The teasing had practically stopped. It was like Hiccup had started a new life. He would be sorry to see Thomas leave.

Hiccup entered the forest, following a scant path through the foliage that he followed often to get back to his house. It was getting darker and darker, and Hiccup quickened his pace to be home before nightfall. No telling what would come out of the woods at night. The other teens liked to catch him off-guard sometimes, when he was alone. Luckily they didn't hurt him too badly, but it always stung for a few days afterwards. Hiccup glanced around the trees, determined not to be surprised by an ambush. I wonder where Thomas is. The stranger had odd hours. Some days Hiccup was sure that Thomas didn't get a wink of sleep, and yet he never looked harrowed or fatigued. There was something off about him, and Hiccup wasn't ready to call draconian yet, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it.

"Hiyah!"

Hiccup started. The high-pitched yell was followed by a crack of splitting wood. It happened again. "Aaaahh!" _Crunch._

Hefting the bag, Hiccup cautiously moved towards the noise to investigate. The woods were growing darker as he went but he could see someone moving through the branches. There was a bright silvery flash and then the blade of an axe buried itself halfway into a tree trunk. Someone stormed forward to yank on the handle with a thin, strong arm and Hiccup's heart jumped into his throat. It was Astrid. Her ash-blond braid swung as she freed the axe from the bark, beautiful features smudged with dirt and locked in a scowl.

Something fell out of Hiccup's bag, and he looked down and frantically tried to grab the small hammer slipping out of the gaping

flap. His fingers grazed the handle and it spun to the ground with a muffled clang.

Hiccup only heard a slight hiss before looking up and seeing the axe coming for him. He yelped and ducked, feeling his hair ruffle with the force of the weapon passing overhead. "Hold up!" he yelled, popping back up and raising his hands in surrender. "Don't shoot, it's just-just me!"

"Oh." Astrid swung her legs over a fallen log, scrutinizing him. "In that case, I'm sorry I missed."

Hiccup laughed nervously. "That's...that's a good one, you really...have got...yeah." She said nothing, just meeting his own eyes with her intense blue ones as she pushed past him to retrieve her axe. Twirling it upright, she inspected the blade, brushing it free of splinters.

"What are you doing out here?" she said stoutly.

"Me? Oh, I was, uh..." He fumbled for his dropped hammer, stuffing it back in his bag. "Just some really, uh, tough wagon repairs being made, ol' Gunnar needed my help..."

"Mhmm."

There was a moment of awkward silence. Hiccup fiddled with the strap of the bag. _Say something!_

"Hey, so, do you...I don't know...want me to walk you home? It is getting dark out-"

"Thanks. I can manage." She glanced at him out of the corner of her eyes. "Besides, wouldn't want your Kosmarian friend joining us."

Hiccup's stomach dropped. "Sorry?"

"You heard me." The axe blade swung down to rest at her feet and she tossed her bangs out of her face. "We've all seen him cozying up to you and we know what one of them looks like."

"Look, I don't know what you're-"

"Drop the act, Hiccup," she said aggressively, stepping forward. "What do you have to say for yourself?!"

Hiccup started to get annoyed as well as fearful. "He's not a Kosmarian!" he protested.

Astrid snorted and grabbed the collar of his shirt and he gulped nervously, leaning back. "Stop lying to me!"

"He's not."

Astrid's eyes widened and they both spun around, relief flushing away Hiccup's initial burst of fear. A dark, hooded figure stood watching them from the undergrowth. Astrid released Hiccup, stepped back and hefted the axe higher. "He's not lying," Thomas repeated, making his way towards them. "I'm not from Kosmaria."

Sighing, Hiccup turned back to Astrid, gesturing broadly at Thomas.
"See, what did I tell y-"

Something blurred past him, and there was a sudden scuffle. Astrid yelped in surprise and the axe went flying to bounce into the undergrowth. When things had settled, Thomas had Astrid pinned down, one foot on her wrist, a hand on her arm and something...sharp...pressed up against her neck. It was too dark to tell. "No, not lying at all," he said musingly.

She gasped, head tilted backwards to avoid cutting herself.
"You're...you're one of them!"

"I'm surprised it took so long for all of you to clue in. Now...it seems as though you're too late."

"Thomasâ€¦"

Hiccup, I'm sorry. I won't hurt her. It's only a show. Can you hear me?

Hiccup's eyes widened. _...Thomas?_ he thought hesitantly.

Yes! Yes, it's me. I'm sorry. I'm not trying to hurt either of you, I'm just trying to scare her off. Just play along.

Astrid bucked under his grip, trying to thrash her legs. "They'll come looking for us soon," she panted, "and then they'll know about you."

Thomas, what is she talking about?

There was a pause. _Do you trust me?_

What?

Do you trust me, Hiccup? Something curled over Astrid's legs in a strange, serpentine way, and suddenly Hiccup started to harbor the beginnings of an awful, terrible recognition. Why Astrid was so angry, why Gobber had come to his conclusion, why there was not cold steel against Astrid's neck, but a cluster of something in his hands, shining darkly. _It can't be._

Hiccup, no, please, just wait. "The others have had their suspicions, girl. I am sure they would not be surprised."

Do...you...trust me? "But please, go fetch them. It will make no difference."

How can I? Hiccup cried out in his mind. _You...you lied!_

It was for my own protection, and yours, too. Please. I need an answer.

He hesitated, flexing his fingers, barely hearing Astrid say, "Let me up and I just might!" He wished Thomas would turn around so he could see his reptilian eyes and see if he was telling the truth, but he could only rely on their sudden mental connection. He glanced back and forth between the two, pressing his fingers together in indecision.

Yes, I do...butâ€|

Then don't stop me."How about I don't?"

Thomas' hand suddenly flew into the air, and Hiccup's eyes widened as he caught the sharp edges of claws. Astrid gasped and tried to break free, and then the hand slammed downward.

Into the earth next to her ear.

Chest heaving, Astrid glared up at Thomas with a mix of fear and determined anger, and she leaped away from him when he let her up. "Go on. Go and tell them." He lifted himself into a crouch, backing up to stand in front of Hiccup. "But don't touch him again. Understood?"

Astrid wrinkled her nose and narrowed her eyes at him. "You can have him," she breathed, turning tail and running into the darkness. Her footsteps faded away and then they were alone.

Breathing hard, Hiccup slowly turned to look at his friend, taking in his new appearance. His hood was gone; in its place was a mop of unruly black hair and twitching, scaly ears. His wrists were speckled with dark scales, coalescing on his fingertips from which emerged ash-grey claws that shone faintly in the moonlight. A tail emerged from under his cloak, two large, flat fins running along the tip.

No, there was no mistaking it. He was a draconian.

Hiccup was reeling with shock, but he also felt an undercurrent of grim expectation. So, this is his secret. He'd thought all draconians had gone extinct hundreds of years ago. Apparently he was mistaken, along with everyone else in Traum.

But that wasn't the worst part. Kunnia's long, bloody history with the draconians ensured that if anyone in Berk found out that Thomas wasn't human, they would happily run a sword through his heart. And that was if they were feeling merciful.

Thomas backpedaled a few steps, raising his claw-tipped hands. "Hiccup, I know what you're thinking, but I swear I mean you and your Tribe no harm-"

"I know."

He blinked. "Really?"

"Really," Hiccup assured him. "You're my friend. I would never hurt you."

Thomas' strange assortment of ears perked up. "Thank you, Hiccup."

"What are we going to do, though?" Hiccup pressed, looking in the direction Astrid had run. "She's going to tell everyone, and then they'll figure out it was you!"

Working his jaw, Thomas glanced at the ground. His tail flicked. "I

guess I need to leave now."

Hiccup's heart sank. "I'm sorry...you shouldn't have stood up for me."

Thomas looked up with a sudden intensity. "I had to," he said firmly. "I should have told you earlier, but you see...I've been looking for you."

A rock dropped into Hiccup's stomach. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm not just passing through by chance. I came looking for Berk specifically. Looking for you."

Everything seemed to fade out of existence as Hiccup struggled to process what Thomas was telling him. Maybe he was more dangerous than Hiccup had thought. "Why?" he croaked.

"First of all...Hiccup, I don't think you quite understand how important you are. A great shift in power is going to occur because of you. We need your help."

"We?"

Thomas spread his arm, as though to encompass an invisible crowd. "All of us-the people of Kosmaria."

Now Hiccup was truly confused. Kosmaria wanted him. Him. The Kunnian, the commoner, the runt. He laughed bitterly. "I hate to break it to you, Thomas, but you've got the wrong guy. I'm just the village screw-up. Nobody needs me or my help."

Thomas folded his arms and considered him a moment, looking thoughtful. "The day I came into the village. The day you met me. Did you happen to feel something? That somehow you knew I was coming, perhaps?"

"Wha...how did you know-?"

"Just a feeling. The same feeling I got when you were close, in fact-or something similar. What was it like?"

Hiccup recalled the day Thomas had entered the village. "It was kind of a cold feeling, a pulse. It...told me things."

"Mmh." Thomas nodded. "Different from mine. It varies."

"What varies?!" Hiccup thought he was going to explode.

"Your Call," Thomas answered. "Every mage has a different one, to tell them when other mages are near."

"Every mage...other...wait, does that mean you're a-?"

Thomas nodded with a small smile. "And not only me, but you as well. There was powerful magic present at your birth. Hiccup. It's woven into your being, your mind, your very soul. You are a mage."

Hiccup's heart thundered to a stop.

Somehow this idea seemed more ridiculous than the rest combined. The very thought that he could possess power that had been revered for centuries was madness. He actually had to lean against a tree for support. "I...no...that's crazy."

"Why is it so hard to believe?" Thomas strode forward and grasped Hiccup by the shoulders. "Hiccup, haven't you ever wished that you could make a difference? That you could be someone important? I've seen the way that they treat you in the village. It's horrible. They wouldn't dare to show you disrespect if they knew about what you can do. When I came to Berk, your Call to me was so strong it almost stopped my heart. Just trust me on this, Hic. I know magic. You're supposed to be incredibly powerful, more than an ordinary mage would be. Don't you want that?"

Hiccup hesitated. "Well, of course, but...what can I do? I've never used magic before; how am I going to use it now?"

"We can teach you," Thomas assured him, releasing his grip. "I can show you how to find and access the magic within you, but it's Pitch Black who could really teach you how to wield it.

Hiccup gaped at him. "Pitch Black?" Pitch was the shadowy leader of Kosmaria, a faceless man whom people in Traum knew little about. Hiccup had never suspected he was a mage. "But that meansâ€¦"

Thomas nodded. "You would have to leave Kunnia."

A barrage of shouts started up in the distance, and Hiccup saw torches flaring through the trees. Astrid would have told practically everyone in the village by now, and it had been a long time since they'd been on a draconian hunt. Thomas' ears stood up straight and stiff.

"They're coming," Hiccup murmured.

"Hiccup, please." He was nearly begging now. "I know it's a huge decision to make, but you have to make it quickly. There's no time to think about it. We need you, Hiccup."

We need you.

It was the phrase Hiccup craved, the one that was never spoken to him. But Thomas was saying it now. And somehow that seemed to change every feeling that he had towards staying in Berk. Ravaging indecision was replaced with firm purpose.

"All right. I'll go with you."

There was an almost tangible release of tension in the air as Thomas looked relieved. "All right, then. We need everyone else off our tail. Just do what I say, okay?"

Hiccup nodded quickly, the heated rush of his decision filling him like fire. "What do I have to do?"

"Go to your house and pack whatever you need. It's a long journey and we won't be coming back." As an afterthought, he added, "And don't

panic at what you hear. Just keep going."

"Wait, why would I-what are you going to do?"

It was dark, but Hiccup could just make out a gleaming, fanged smile on Thomas' face. "You'll see."

Suddenly he was gone, blurring up a tree like a squirrel, hardly making a sound. Hiccup shivered at his inhuman speed and stealth. A few branches twitched and then all was still and silent, as though Thomas had never been there. Hiccup stood for a heartbeat longer, trying to spot the draconian in the boughs of the pine.

"Go on, Hiccup," he whispered. "I'll be fine. Go get your stuff."

Hiccup started and then set off towards his house. Seconds passed and the villagers grew louder and Thomas still hadn't done anything.

Then the growl began.

It didn't even start out as a sound, just a deep, low vibration far inside Hiccup's chest. Every one of the Berkians fell silent. The hum expanded into a rumble, a throbbing beat interlaid with clicks and a throaty hiss. An instinctual, primal fear welled up inside of Hiccup as the snarl grew in volume. _He's not trying to scare me,_ he had to remind himself. _I am not being hunted. I am not being hunted._

A sharp retort sounded through the woods, and Hiccup looked back just in time to see a tree smashing to the ground, the Kunnians scattering in fear. _Did he just push a tree over?! How strong is this guy?_ The growl crashed into a full-throated roaring screech. The torches circled in panicked confusion before making their charge, their shouts dim in comparison to Thomas' draconian call. Hiccup hurried through the woods and burst out of the undergrowth, sprinting towards his house. He was already going through what he needed in his mind. _Waterskin...dagger...flint_ The door screamed on its hinges and he blasted upstairs to his room, packing as quickly as he could. The roars and battle cries raged on outside, and as soon as Hiccup was finished, he thundered down the stairs and back outside, heading south towards the lake. His feet were moving so fast, he was afraid he might land badly and end up falling on his face. He couldn't believe he was doing this.

The bushes exploded in the distance; Hiccup ground to a halt, startled, as Thomas came barreling out of the undergrowth on all fours like an oversized wolf. He was very obviously not headed for the harbor. "Thomas what-what are you-?!"

"Change of plans, we have to go through the village." Behind the draconian, a bright orange light danced through the dark branches.

"Please tell me you did not just set the forest on fire!" Hiccup ran his hands through his hair as Thomas bounded upright next to him.

"Easy, bud." Thomas held up his hands defensively. "That wasn't me, someone dropped their torch." Something dark was splattered across

his claws, glittering blackly in the faint firelight.

"And-and what is on your hands, exactly?"

"Fox blood. But it's supposed to be yours, so shush."

Hiccup wasn't quite sure he heard right. "Excuse me?"

Thomas looked at him seriously. "Hiccup, the only way your father won't come after you is if he thinks you're dead. So...I convinced him that you were." He flexed his claws and watched the blood glisten. "It didn't take much. They wouldn't put it past me to lure you into the forest and kill you."

Feeling queasy, Hiccup stared at the stains that supposedly marked where his lifeblood had drained out. He understood why Thomas had done it, but it was strange to think that everyone thought he was dead. "So...I probably shouldn't let anyone see me."

"Probably," Thomas agreed. "Come on, let's go." He dropped to all fours and took off. Hiccup hurried after him, still trying to untangle his feelings. _I'm dead. I'm dead to Dad._

The firm dirt masked his footsteps, and Thomas might as well have been a specter for all the noise he made. They rushed through the village, ducking behind houses, taking shortcuts, doubling back to avoid being seen. The pair had almost made it to the outskirts of the village when Thomas practically tackled Hiccup into an alley and crouched down in the darkness, claws spread wide, facing the street. It was still so bizarre to see him as a half-dragon.

"Who's coming?" Hiccup whispered, back to the wooden shingles of the closest hut.

"Two search parties, both directions. There's no way around them." When Hiccup stepped forward to look, Thomas lifted his tail and pinned him back to the wall. "No. You'll stay here. I'll scare them off."

"You really think you can?" Hiccup's heart thundered against the heavy band of scaly muscle across his ribs. The draconian glanced at him, slanted eyes flashing.

"Remember when I said no matter what you hear, you stick to the plan?" he said in a low voice.

Hiccup nodded.

"Well, that unforeseeably just became ten times more important. Don't move, don't talk, just stay put until it's all clear."

A sense of foreboding stole over Hiccup. The torches and shouting grew closer. He swallowed his questions and nodded again. "Okay."

The tail fell away and Thomas quietly hooked his claws into the hut and ascended the steep slope, lithe as a cat. Hiccup shrank farther back into the alley as several men passed his hiding place, their burning torches throwing wide strips of light and shadow over the ground. He couldn't hear Stoick among them and he didn't know if that

made him relieved or nervous.

"I told you, I saw him come down here!"

"Well, the devil's gone blasted missin', 'asn't 'e? C'mon, spread out, 'e 'asn't got wings, 'e couldn't 'ave gone far-"

But before the villagers could do much more than grumble, someone began to laugh. It started as a close-mouthed chuckle, low and vibrating and coming from somewhere above their heads. It grew into a full-throated laugh that rolled and boomed in Hiccup's ears and made him shiver. It was the perfect mix of contempt, malice, intimidation and eerie humor. Hiccup nearly forgot that Thomas was acting.

"Lost something, have we?" he jeered.

The Berkians exploded. "We'll mount yer head in the Great Hall, we will!" one of them bellowed. "What'd you do with the boy?"

"Ohhhh," Thomas purred, drawing the sound out. "Somebody didn't get the message. Well, why don't I just deliver it." Hiccup glanced up and saw him perched on top of the gable, his outline faintly defined by the orange firelight from below. The profile of his face was just visible; he was grinning wickedly, baring his teeth. He lifted an arm, hooking his claws, letting the light play on the scarlet stains. "I'm afraid little Hiccup had an...accident."

The men gasped involuntarily. Hiccup didn't blame them. Thomas was being extremely convincing. The smoke and flames glared and billowed behind him, the night black as ink, his tone disturbingly amused.

Thomas noticed their sudden, fearful silence. "Oh, don't worry. I've had my fun. Three hundred years of dead draconians has been avenged." His voice grew darker, deadlier. "Or maybe it hasn't. It's your choice, really. Don't give us a reason to come back and we won't. Tell that to your Chief." With that, he drew a scrap of fabric from his belt and let it fall to the ground. Hiccup caught a glimpse of rust-colored stains on a light green material. Somehow he'd gotten a hold of a piece of Hiccup's shirt. "Oh, and I wouldn't go looking for the body if I were you. Evidell's big, and besides, I'm fairly sure you'd all like some undisturbed sleep for the next few weeks."

"Yu're a monster," one of the Vikings spat, swinging his torch through the air.

"I am, aren't I?" Thomas said, satisfied. "What an honor, to go from being a mere animal to a monster. Maybe you should favor yourselves with the same promotion."

Before the Vikings could respond, he whirled around and seemingly vanished from the rooftop. Hiccup saw him climb to the back of the house and hang vertically on the wall. They both held their breath and waited for the stunned search parties to leave and take their light with them

As soon as it was dark, Thomas dropped to the ground with a soft flump and Hiccup approached him cautiously. Something told him that he hadn't been acting the entire time. "Thomas, I-"

"Not here." Yes, there was definitely something off in the way he clipped the words off and how his ears lay flat against his head. "I don't want to talk about it." Their gazes met briefly, and then Thomas' eyes flicked away as he busied himself checking his pack. "Let's just get going."

* * *

><p>They stopped walking after a few hours, when Hiccup was finally exhausted. He hadn't said a word-in fact, neither of them had for a while-but eventually Thomas had noticed Hiccup's feet dragging and pulled them over in the forest they'd reached. Thomas lit a small fire; as Hiccup watched wearily from his seat on a fallen tree, he noticed that Thomas used no flint to start the flames. Instead he snapped his claws together briskly until a spark appeared and spread through the tinder. For a few minutes, they sat quietly, listening to the burning branches crackle with heat.<p>

"It wasn't real," Thomas said suddenly. Hiccup glanced up at him. "Back at the village-none of that was real. I didn't mean it. That was the beast they expected to see, so I gave it to them."

Hiccup nodded. "Yeah, I know. It-it worked, though."

"Yes, it did." Off in the distance, a lone wolf began its midnight call. Hiccup became acutely aware of the draconians' inhuman gaze drilling into him, and he scuffed the dirt at his feet.

"Why?" Thomas finally said. "Why aren't you scared of me?"

The question caught him off guard. "Why should I be?" Hiccup said, puzzled. "You're my friend."

"But...you've been raised to hate my kind, your whole village revolves around killing us and fearing us. If anyone else had seen me in the woods, they would've cut my heart out. So why didn't you?"

Staring into the fire, Hiccup considered what Thomas was saying. "I don't know," he said hesitantly. "I feel like...just because you learn something new about someone, doesn't mean you should hate them. I'm still friends with you because you're a good guy, not 'cause I'm scared you'll eat me. You know?"

"I know." A twig cracked as Thomas kneaded the ground. "I'm just so used to being looked down on because I look different from humans. Honestly, you're one of the few people that actually talks to me like an equal and not a beast. There's something different about you, Hiccup."

"Yeah, you could say that," Hiccup said, laughing a bit. Then he grew quiet. "Is it really that bad, being a draconian?"

"Not bad, just...hard. Lonely, sometimes. Even with my clan, we were always moving around, avoiding humans and nymphs and other draconian clans." Thomas snorted a bit. "I don't know why we were so insistent on leaving the nymphs alone.; we're two of the few races that has a lifespan longer than a human."

Hiccup's curiosity was aroused. "How long do draconians live? How old are you?"

Leaning back against a tree, Thomas laced his hands behind his head and grinned slyly at Hiccup. "I just turned three hundred and eighty-nine last spring."

Hiccup's jaw dropped. "What?" He couldn't fathom living even a hundred years, let alone four centuries.

"Oh, that's nothing. I'm practically an adolescent in draconian circles. Still get treated like one, too."

"But-that's just-how-?" sputtered Hiccup. "Are you immortal?"

The draconian chuckled. "No, no. Nobody's made it past a thousand. We're just made of tougher stuff than your little human bodies are."

"Wow," breathed Hiccup. Thomas didn't look a day over twenty. _Three hundred and eighty-nine._ He tried to stifle a yawn, but it snuck up on him and he didn't fool Thomas for a second.

"You should probably sleep," he noted, ear flicking.

"Shouldn't we trade watches?"

Thomas got to his feet. "You'd be surprised how long I can stay awake. It's all right, I won't let anything eat you."

Hiccup grinned wryly. "Well, if you're sure."

"Trust me, you'll want all the rest you can get. We've got a long journey ahead of us."

13. Chapter 12

If there was one thing Jack hated, it was people besting or outsmarting him. He prided himself on being one of the top thieves in either Kosmaria or Traum, and thus felt that he had a reputation to uphold. Not that he was a crime lord or anything but if you threatened to set Jack Frost on someone, they would leave you well enough alone. Nobody wanted to wake up with their belongings strewn across their room, their pockets looted and their pants missing. Jack had done enough inside jobs to become a force to be reckoned with.

So it was to Jack's great annoyance that the girl he'd been trying to ditch for the past hour walked in the door of The Topsy Bull and sat down at his table.

Jack peered at her from under his hood. She was fairly short, half a head shorter than him, and mostly covered in a dark cloak. Her hood just barely concealed a mass of curly red hair. Over her shoulder was a strung bow and on her hip, a quiver of arrows and a sword. The tavern owner eyed her nervously before deciding to ignore her. Jack tried to follow suit, but she continued to bore him with her bright blue eyes and he got that strange tingling feeling that he'd felt ever since she started following him.

Finally, he couldn't take it any longer.

"What?" he said irritably, meeting her gaze. The weird tingles disappeared and she gave a little smile, and for a second Jack felt a flash of panic. What if Pitch had sent her to capture him? He carefully nudged his foot against his staff, which was leaned against the wall next to him.

"Joost thought yu'd want some company," she said nonchalantly, crossing her legs. Jack identified her accent as Cesaret. _She's a long way from home._

"I travel alone, kid," Jack said dismissively, even though she couldn't have been more than a few years younger than him. He had to stay on top of this conversation. "Unless you're wanting to hire me out, in which case I'm booked." He was lying-sort of. He figured it would be better to shut down his little "business" and lay low until this whole thing with Pitch blew over.

"Ah'm not lookin' fer a henchman," she said shortly, her attempt at congeniality disappearing. "Ah'm comin' tae fetch yu."

Jack's trepidation mounted; he knew this moment would come. "Look, if you think I'm just gonna come quietly to Noctis, you've got another thing coming."

Her brow furrowed. "Noctis? No, the Guardians sent me."

Jack was thrown by her statement. Bewildered, he frowned and lifted his head higher, exposing his pale skin to the dirty light filtering through the window. "Sorry, what?"

"The Guardians," she repeated. "Ah'm one o' them, ah'm an apprentice."

Well, that was an unexpected turn of events. Jack sat back heavily and considered his options. "Okay, hang on. If the Guardians are hunting me down, that means I'm a...a mage?" The thought seemed utterly ridiculous and yet not so far from the truth.

"Doon't go thinkin' yu're some special snowflake," she said flatly. "Yu are, ah am, the Guardians are."

"Can you prove it?" Jack said, interest piqued.

She raised an eyebrow and suddenly a tiny flame sparked into life in her hand, spitting sparks into the hazy air. There was no kindling, no flint, nothing but the palm of her slim hand and the wavering tongue of flame. Jack's eyes widened. She was a real fire mage, and those had become incredibly rare. The light died and she tucked her hands inside her cloak. "Do yu believe me naow?"

Jack shrugged. "Guess I'll have to. What do they want with me?"

"They want tae train yu, back at their hideout," she stated, as though she'd rather be doing anything but having this conversation with him. "Ah figure it's a wee bit safer than roamin' th' countryside while Pitch is on yur back. Yu might as well be wearin' a

sign askin' 'im tae pick yu off. Gods know what 'e wants with yu but it can't be good."

Jack tapped his fingers on the table, thinking quickly. On one hand, he was glad to have a choice other than turning himself in to Pitch. On the other, however, he was reluctant to pledge himself to such an outspoken organization and thus take a side in the underground conflict between Kosmaria and Traum. Either way, he would be responding to the wanted posters and he would be doing it publicly. Normally he wasn't one to judge good or evil-especially considering how conflicted he felt about his own allegiance, let alone anyone else's-but something about Pitch definitely put him off. Something about the way he didn't refute the many dark claims thrown his direction, how long he'd been a silent shadow at the head of such a lost country. Something was very wrong with Pitch and Jack didn't want any part of it.

"Soâ€|" Jack said aloud, drawing the sound out. "I'm a mage, you're a mage, and we're going to be trained by the good guys?"

"Aye. An' one more thing." She leaned forward and whispered, "We're takin' down Pitch, four of us. Yu an' I are numbers one an' two."

Well that was good enough for Jack. He slapped the table lightly. "All right, kid. You've got yourself a deal."

"Finally." She stuck her hand out and Jack shook it, feeling it almost burn against his freezing cold skin. "Ah didn't catch yur name b'fore."

But as Jack opened his mouth, the door to the inn banged open and everyone fell silent. Jack was seated at an angle where he couldn't quite see the door, but he could certainly hear the gravelly voice demand, "Which one of you is Jack Frost?"

The girl slowly turned her head to raise her eyebrows at Jack, and he nodded, heart thundering. She pressed her lips together and adjusted her bow. "We'll have tae fight our way out."

"No, wait." He pressed the side of his foot against her boot to stop her. "Just distract them. We'll stun them and get out quick."

She made a face. "Och, fine. Yu're no fun."

"Oh, believe me. I'm all about fun." He leaned sideways to get a good view of the guards by the door. Kosmarians, all three of them. Jack rarely saw them up so close. They wore torn black half-capes and faded tunics with the white Kosmarian sigil embroidered on them, although the white had faded to a dirty eggshell color where it had once been pure and silvery. Their tall leather boots were strapped to the knee. Two of them were of lower rank than the third; they carried barbed spears and simple clothing with little adornment other than their dull chain mail. The last Kosmarian guard had a long hand-and-a-half sword sheathed at his hip and his apparel was considerably cleaner. All of them had horse-shaped face guards. The black metal flashed in the firelight as the lead guard scanned the tavern, eyes glittering faintly within the black eye-holes. An uncomfortable wave of whispers swept the room. Jack tugged his hood lower.

The captain nodded at the men flanking him and they left his side to travel around the room, one person at a time, inspecting faces. "We know he's in here, and we'll find you. If anyone tries to hide him, there will be consequences."

Jack's stomach dropped as he saw several people giving him side glances. _They wouldn't turn me in,_ he reasoned with himself. _Would they?_

There was no time to debate that now. Both he and the fire mage were in real, immediate danger-

Wait, where did she go!?!

Jack looked around frantically for the girl but she had apparently vanished into thin air. _No, no, don't try anything stupid-_

"All righ', yu win!"

Jack's head snapped up. She was standing in front of the guards who were staring at her, bewildered. One of them glanced up and then back down at his paper a few times, comparing her to the poster in his hands. "Uh-Captainâ€|"

The girl ran him over. "Ah saw him, he ran out th' back door joost before yu got here. Yu migh' still be able tae see where he's got to." She raised her eyebrows as they continued to stand there uncertainly. "Well, go on! Doon't take all day about it!"

Glaring at her suspiciously, the captain stalked past her to the innkeeper, followed by his guards. "Let us in the back," he ordered, and the man quickly obliged, lifting up a section of the counter in order to let them pass.

She whirled around, gesturing at Jack, and he wasted no time in jumping up from the table, snatching his staff and following her out the door before someone had the chance to stop them. He grabbed her hand and they shot across the street, dodging several surprised and irritated Kosmarians. An overturned cart materialized in their path but Jack didn't even blink. Summoning the wind, he leaped into the air, his dirty feet just clearing the haphazard wheels. The breeze swept under Merida as well and she yelped as she was hauled over the wagon, too. It was inconspicuous enough to look like an overly acrobatic jump.

The pair slammed into the wall of an alley, panting hard. "What was tha'?" she gasped.

"I've got a few tricks up my sleeve." Jack began strolling back into the shadows. "C'mon, princess."

"Mah name is Merida," she huffed, stalking after him.

"Whatever you say, Your Highness. After you."

End
file.